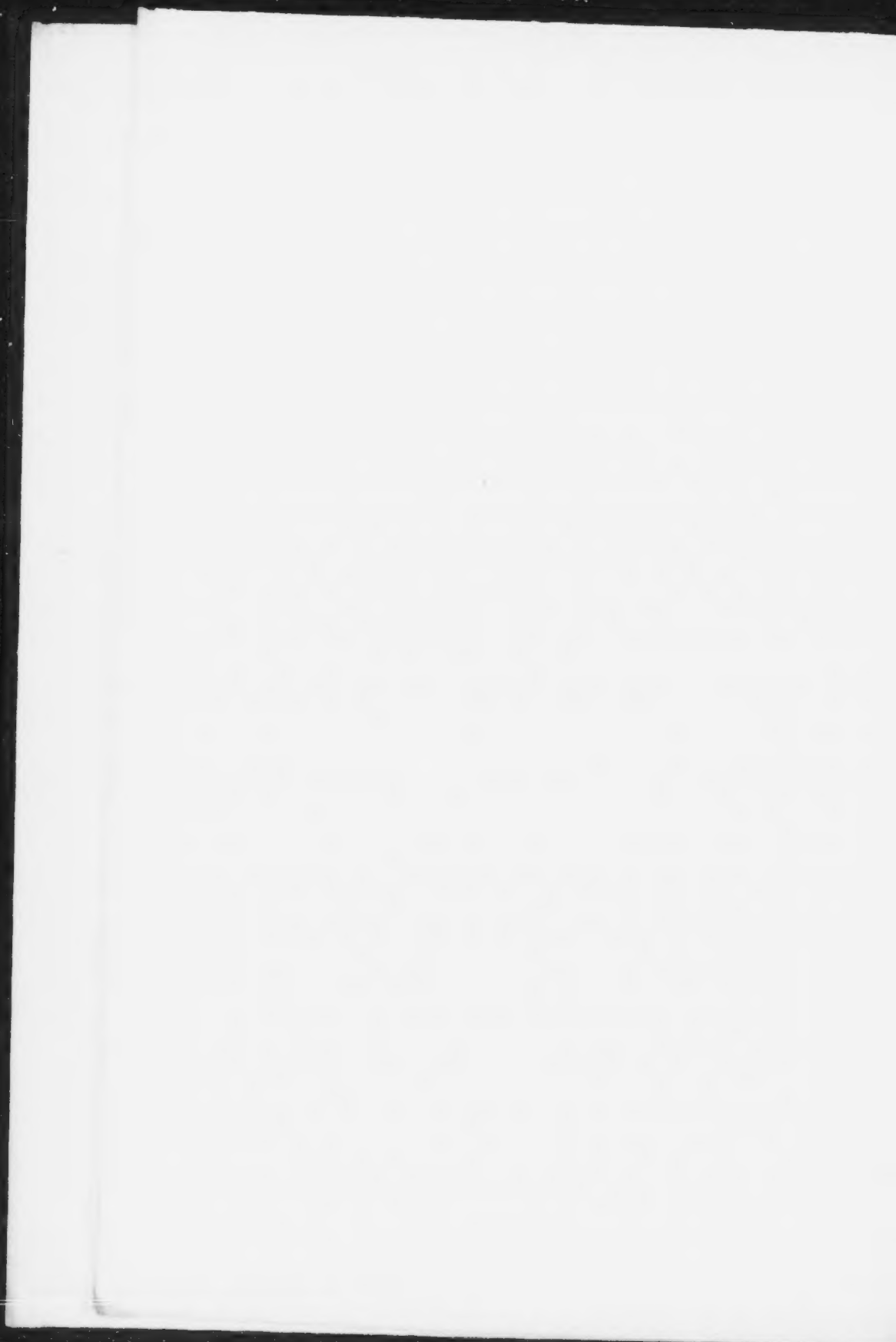
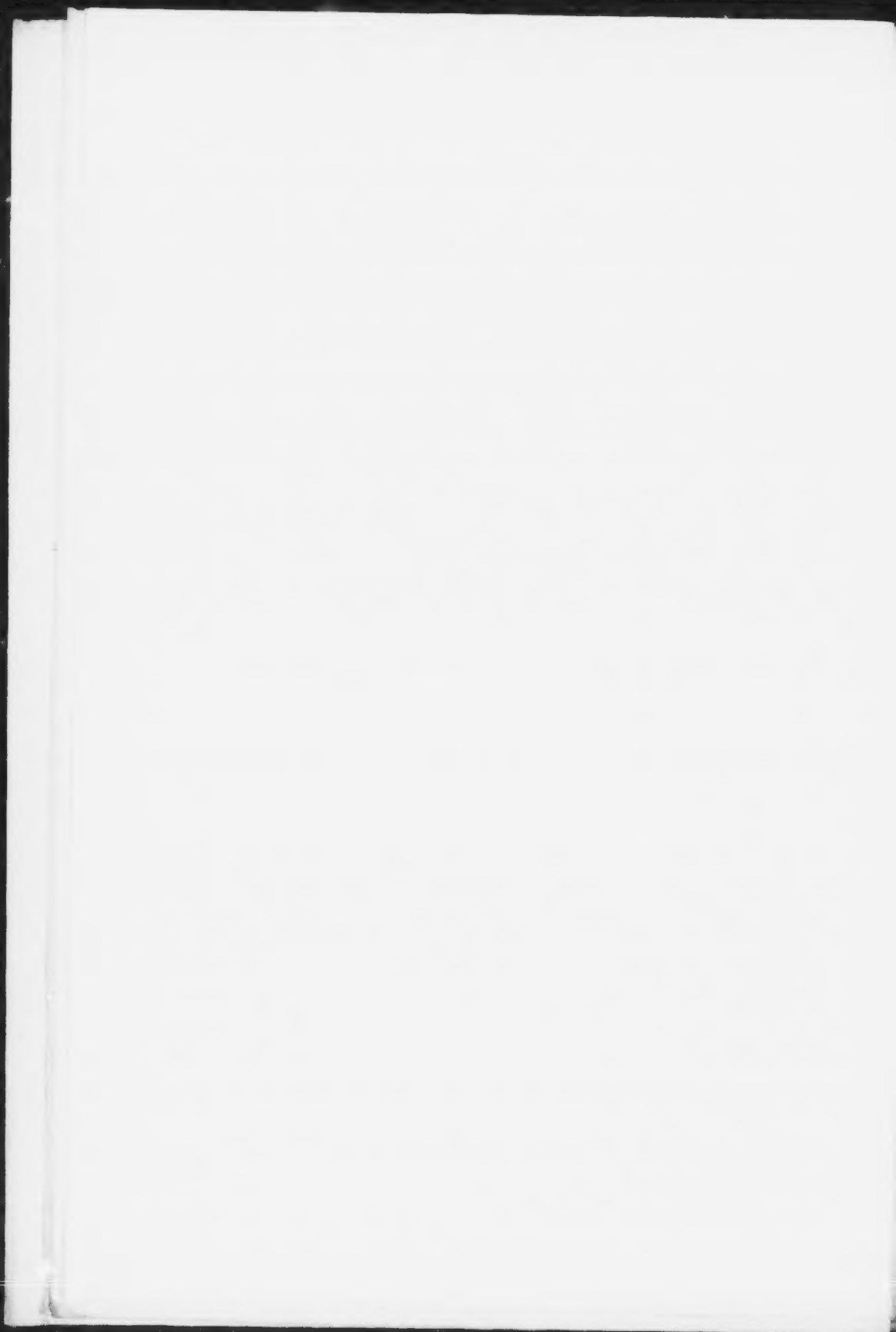


TOPHAM'S
FOLLY
BY
GEORGE STEVENSON





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TOPHAM'S FOLLY

BOOK I



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BOOK I

CHAPTER I

THE HARVEST FIELD

A HARVEST field in the fulness of its time beneath a blaze of sun in mid-September, a harvest field when machinery was still looked upon with suspicion and the women and children came, when the sheaves had all been led to glean the garnered fields,—a scene vital with busy life, women in print dresses and big sun-bonnets, who wielded their rakes or, dexterously plaiting a stress of straw, stooped to bind it about a sheaf not without a certain rustic grace in both pose and action; men with sleeves rolled high up their brown arms, their flannel shirts open at the collar showing a hairy chest, assiduously active; children working like their parents but with a certain stimulus of play about their business; slow-rolling waggons high piled with golden wheat, or here a team in waiting, the sleek cart horses hanging their heads, drowsy in the heat.

A scene that, coupled as it was with plentifulness, was pleasant to witness and brought a smile of self-congratulation to the face of old Farmer Fall who, like a Field-Marshal at a Review, rode round the field on his grey cob, ordering and directing and leaving no one free from the incitement of his sharp-eyed supervision.

One little group he detected working apart from the rest — a woman clad like the others in cotton dress and sun-bonnet, whose shading eaves hid her face from him, and three children, a girl and two boys, the girl a copy of her mother save that her frock was protected by a pinafore, the boys in blue shirts and well-patched nether garments, whose curious shape betrayed laborious fashioning from some discarded paternal pair; and trundled along with them and never staid beyond the mother's sight or call of her voice, a baby girl in a hand-made cart of wood, sitting contentedly on a little heap of clean sacking.

Old Fall, seeing work slackening as across the fields from the house came a procession of youths and maids bearing baskets and cans, cans that gleamed like silver when the sun caught them, turned and trotted his cob towards this same little group.

The woman turned as he approached and he saw, as all along he had known he would see, Mrs. Wintersgill, his head-carter's wife. A fine woman and one on whom old Fall would not have been loth to exercise some old seigniorial right, — a gallant compliment perhaps or, if the dame had looked inviting, an admiring chuck beneath the chin. But there was something about this woman as she faced him — and her attitude was entirely respectful — that forbade any such idle dalliance, although old George had been a great buck in his day and still boasted at the farmers' ordinary, when a little heady with the spirit with which he had cemented a bargain, that there was not a woman yet who had ever daunted him.

As it was, George's hand — a poor old hand it had come to be, palsied and shaking, — went to his beaver; not that there was anything remarkable in the action from him for it was one of his old-fashioned gallan-

tries to uncover to any woman, be she great or humble.

"Very warm to-day, Mrs. Wintersgill."

"It is very warm, sir."

"But we mustn't grumble. It's a grand harvest. Last year was the ruination of some, I know. This won't make up to them, I doubt, though it does to me. Nothing like something at the back of you, eh, Mrs. Wintersgill?"

"I suppose not, sir."

Baffled as he was by her demureness, he still regarded her considerably,—a rare face hers, not often the type of face found among her class, fine in feature, thoughtful in expression, with handsome eyes that, though they might mirror a hundred different moods, shewed clearly one thing—a will behind. It would be difficult to resist a command or withstand a plea backed by those eyes.

"I always notice you work apart, Mrs. Wintersgill," he said at last.

"I cannot talk and work, sir."

The old man grinned.

"You should say that to my Ann. She's of your thinking exactly. A regular downright old maid, Ann, but thorough. That's what I call her,—thorough."

"I hope Miss Ann is better to-day, sir."

"Aye, she's better. She'll be coming into the fields later on. She's bringing her fine friends down with her. But here's the allowance coming. You'll be waiting to foregather with the others for a snack and a chat."

"Thank you, sir, but my husband will bring me what I want."

Here was a chance at last for some sly thrust that

should bring the colour to that impassive face of hers and send him chuckling away, well pleased.

"Yon's a rare husband, that of yours," said old George Fall, with a knowing look.

But there was no blush, no bashfulness.

"I owe him everything," she said simply. The gravity in her eyes, as she said it, disconcerted him. He turned his cob's head abruptly and trotted away, muttering into his grizzled red beard as he went,—

"Damn it, but she's as icy as she's handsome, that woman."

When he had gone the baby began to crow and clap its hands.

It was the "rare husband" who was coming towards them, a plate of bread and cheese in one hand, in the other a yellow mug foaming to the brim with home-brewed beer. He handed them to his wife, who, poising the mug firmly on the stubble, began to break the cheese and bread into portions for the children, whilst the man, taking the clamorous youngster from its wooden cart, sat down upon a truss of straw and began to fondle it.

Not a hundred yards away the other harvesters gathered about the serving-maids with their cans and baskets, and with tongues responding already to the slaking of their master's ale, discussed the woman Wintersgill in low tones.

"How she do set herself up, to be sure."

"Such as we ain't good enough for the like of she."

"What's the mystery—that's what I should like to be at," said a stout woman.

And an old wiseacre, the wit of the group, answered her as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand,

"When a woman has learnt to hold her tongue, 'tis the greatest mystery of all, missus."

If, as the gossips said, there was a mystery about this woman, it is possible from her look of abstraction as she sat beside her husband, crumbling in her fingers the bread and cheese she had taken but not eaten, that she was thinking of it then, reminded, it is likely, by some chronological similarity in the day or by a something fainter still and more elusive which, suggested we scarcely know how, harks us back, whether we would or no, to the secret places of our lives.

Jane, the little girl sitting beside her, and in external appearance a prim miniature of herself, was twelve years old: she herself had been but three years older when, sixteen years ago, she had stolen down the staircase of her father's house, had unchained and unlocked the door, had flown like the wind across the lawn, had crept cautiously -- for it seemed to her that she had caught the sound of an opening window -- along the shrubbery path and so to the little wicket, where her father's stable-lad, his face pink and downless as a girl's, awaited her.

With characteristic honesty she had taken nothing from the home she was leaving except a miniature of her mother (in later years heedlessly destroyed by one of her many babies), that shared her pocket with a very necessary comb and cake of soap; whilst he had some bread he had saved from his last night's supper folded in a clean handkerchief and in the pocket of his cord breeches the savings from his last month's wages.

He had taken her hand and very much like children, moved involuntarily by some tale of wandering and pilgrimage, they had set off, walking with desperate haste and by all sorts of byways, before they reached

the spot where he considered it safe for them to board the coach.

There had been no kissing at the gate, no embracing, nothing in fact to betray to the owls who were philosophic, or to the moon, which might be sympathetic, that the two were no longer mistress and servant but eloping lovers; and in sooth calf-love, strictly speaking, with its mixture of monkeyish curiosity and titillated animalism had had little to do with this flight in the dark. She, poor child, in this desperate act was seeking refuge from such tyranny, such oppression and such abandonment as is veritable torture to young and ardent souls; and him, the one friend of her short life, Fate had almost forced into the position of her rescuer.

The episode indeed was one to the youth of acute embarrassment. She herself had suggested marriage with him as her only chance of escape, but quite frankly and with no more notion of what the state might entail than a babe in arms; for though brought up by her father's mistress and surrounded by conditions that had made them the pariahs of the county, they had affected her innocence no more than the black mould surrounding a snowdrop has the power to sully the perfection of its whiteness.

But he knew and was wholesomely frightened and would willingly, when they had been scarce an hour on the road, have taken her back again, had he not known as well as she the indignities that would be heaped upon her.

So they continued their way—nominally brother and sister—so innocent the maiden, so determined the youth in no way to betray her trust in him,—sometimes afoot, sometimes by stage, sometimes more adventurously—because it was a novelty to them both

—by rail, until they had not only crossed the borders of their native county but were well beyond it, lighting at last upon a mill-town in Lancashire as their ultimate goal.

Here they tarried, he seeking work, she hiding in the single room he had taken for her, for three weeks whilst their banns were being put; and by that time though she herself showed nothing more than an ordinary friendliness and simple desire to get the deed done so that she might consider herself safe, his — whether from propinquity or the natural effect upon his senses of her personality and her sex — had changed; and he had come to find in her what men do find in the woman they regard as the complement and promise of their lives.

So one Sunday morning before the customary service they were married, the Parson, who tied the knot, scenting nothing extraordinary in either; for the girl, who on the Monday was to begin work at the same mill as her husband, had already dressed herself for the part; and in her stuff skirt and the shawl folded not without effect about her head, there was nothing to distinguish her to the casual observer from those who on the morrow would be her mates. Though being generally accustomed to round up his couples for matrimonial ties with threatenings of wrath in the world to come and opprobrium in this, something in their demeanour,—shy, child-like, and certainly betraying no secret, premature nibbling at forbidden fruit, had pleased the clergyman greatly; and he had smiled benignly upon the bride and congratulated them both.

They had spent the rest of that day in the country,—walking far out beyond the town to some moors on which the heather had already faded to patches of red

rust among the yellowing bracken; and not returning till the stars were out, when they made their way to her room, where the landlady, stirred to kindness by the morning's event, which in spite of caution the lodger had been unable to hide from her, had prepared a marriage supper for them of Spanish onions with white sauce, which she assured them was a dish at once cheap, nutritious and filling and very much in accordance with their financial position, the last of the bridegroom's savings having been expended on the ring.

Thus they began their new life as man and wife, whether for weal or woe, for such tragedy as might make even the gods weep, or comedy at which their neighbours, tongue in cheek, might smile derisively, I leave to the reader. Certain it is that no Providence intervened to save either from what might easily prove to be an irrevocable mistake.

So far as they were able to learn, no attempt had been made to find their whereabouts, not even pursuit on first discovery. It was not until long afterwards that by mere chance they learnt the cause. That very day of their flight her father's creditors had swooped down upon the place and he, escaping, had been as much a fugitive as they.

However, they were married and if fruitfulness be any proof of nuptial happiness, and there are some old-fashioned folk who still believe it is, theirs was no niggardly share. For the first six years came a child on an average of every eighteen months, though whether due to the youth or incapacity of the mother, or to the conditions of their life, which were uncongenial to both parents but must have been a martyrdom to her, it seemed at first as if they would not succeed in rearing one. And this fact, driven home

to them on each catastrophe which wrung equally the hearts of both, gave an impulse of duty to the inclination, which all along had urged them to return as soon as was feasible to their native county, he to his work amongst the horses which he loved, she to the open skies and green spaces of the fields, which even in her neglected childhood had been her comfort and her passion.

Even so with necessity backing natural desire and some homesickness, almost another decade passed before they had been able to effect their plan. For however fond of "hosses" and capable in management of them Tom might be, it proved difficult, with the pallor of confinement and a town upon his face and the unmistakable stamp of mechanical labour about his person, to convince some burly farmer or loud-voiced squire of the fact.

His chance came at last when, taking advantage of some public holiday, Tom had made his way to the hirings held at some remote town upon the border. As well as the hirings there was a fair; and to the fair had come no less a person than old George Fall, well known even in those parts for prosperity and a special breed of sheep.

"'Tis nobbut to tend carthorses," Tom had said that night when, returning successful from his quest, he had looked — with rueful memory possibly of his younger days of cords and thoroughbreds — at the half-sovereign with which as God's penny old Fall had generously sealed the engagement — "but there's the master's galloway and he says as how his son sometimes runs a hunter or two."

There was another advantage in Mr. Fall's offer — though neither mentioned it — his part of the world was far enough from their own Riding — so that even

if their story had been bruited there, it must by now have died into forgetfulness.

And that had been eighteen months ago.

Her husband, rising as he spoke and putting the reluctant child back into its cart, broke in upon her musing —

“Th’ hosses look in grand fettle to-day, eh, missus?”

His wife looked from the broad grin of mingled pride and pleasure upon his tanned face to a team tethered behind her, their great heads slack, their broad backs glistening in the sun, their muzzles buried deep in their bags of fodder; and a smile, that was half tender, half wistful and withal strangely pathetic lighted the gravity of her face.

“They do that,” she said heartily. “There’s a difference in them since you had the care of them, Tom.”

CHAPTER II

AN OLD-FASHIONED PLEASURING

JANE plucked her mother's sleeve.

"Yon's some ladies and gentlemen coming into the field, mother."

The carter's wife raised herself erect, passing one brown capable hand beneath her sun-bonnet to brush away the sweat with which the heat of the afternoon and her exertion had beaded her forehead. She was still a little away from the others, and alone with Jane. The boys had joined their father; and the baby girl, curled up upon the sacking at the bottom of her cart and with a truss of straw for a pillow, was sleeping peacefully.

The scene in the field was even more active than it had been as old Fall on his grey cob rode from group to group — exhortation, witticism, encouragement on his tongue, his eye on the weather; and from it there rose a sort of hum — the kind of sound one associates instinctively with work whether it be in open field, beehive or factory.

Cleaving the sound and — so clear was the atmosphere — reaching Mrs. Wintersgill and Jane quite distinctly, came a woman's laugh, as Miss Fall and her friends entered the field by the gap of the gateway and stood looking round.

Two only of the groups were recognisable by the woman standing with her back to the sheaves she had just set in stook, — the doctor — he had attended herself and her children that winter — and the master's son, young George, easily distinguishable indeed by his

likeness to his sire — the same features though unaged, brown eyes and red hair and withal the same attachment to a petticoat, perhaps in his case accentuated, and which had tied him that afternoon to the society of his sister's guests instead — as some thought, his sister among them,— of being better employed after his father's supervisory fashion about the fields.

"Yon's young Mrs. Topham walking with Master George an' that's Mr. Topham and Mrs. Oliver behind with Miss Ann," said Jane, who knew them all partly from the gossip of her companions at the Dame School, partly because she had penetrated further into the neighbourhood than her mother. Indeed Jane frequently went as far as Burnthorpe with her father, who was never so happy as when he could stow one of his children safely away into a corner of his waggon, no matter his load, whether corn he was taking to be ground, or coal to be brought from the newly opened station, or malt colms, hot and smelling from the brewery, of which it was extremely pleasant to eat by the way, though on such occasions one had either to trudge by the father's side or else jog straddlewise on the broad back of the shaft horses, hobbledehoy boots dangling, small hands just able to grasp and tightly hold the **bright brass hames.**

That young George showed no bad taste when he chose to escort young Mrs. Topham was indisputable enough to win a grunt of approval from old Fall, who had already turned his cob in their direction. In a dress of some sort of mull with pale blue sprigs upon it, as quaint in design as its flowers were attractive and its starchiness demure, a cottage bonnet of Dunstable straw with a wreath of roses about the crown and beneath the brim, more roses nestling against her brown hair, young Mrs. Topham, if to our eyes old-

fashioned and over-sedate, was as pretty a picture that afternoon as sun or man could look upon. Mrs. Oliver, walking behind her brother and Miss Fall and struck by her sister-in-law's laugh, looked after her enviously.

"Eleanor always looks well," she said to herself — Mrs. Oliver was prone to mental cogitations — "because she always is well."

And Mrs. Oliver sighed so lugubriously that Miss Fall, thinking they were walking too fast, slackened her pace.

Not that Mrs. Oliver had much reason to sigh. In her own pretty, insipid way she had been considered rather a belle before her marriage; and even to-day though her grey alpaca (Mrs. Oliver could not afford starched materials on account of the washing and always wore a more or less modified crinoline for the same reason that is said to have caused the French Empress to introduce them) scarcely perhaps challenged comparison with her sister-in-law's blue and white muslin, she was still a pretty enough woman in spite of a certain fretfulness that circumstances and a sense of ill-usage had brought to her face.

Old Fall had reached them,—all smiles, gallantry and beaming hospitality,—bending low over Mrs. Topham's hand and equally low — chivalrous old soul that he was — over that of her sister-in-law, and shaking his palsied old fist roguishly at James Oliver, whom he still regarded as a daring and youthful practitioner though he had attended him now for some years and had only a few months ago pulled him successfully through a severe illness. "None of your damned experiments upon me, sir," old Fall had warned him upon that occasion; and his salutation to-day seemed to express something not so much of the old distrust

as of half-amused tolerance at the idea that one he had dangled familiarly upon his knee, should have come to know more than he did of the ways and mysteries of his own carcass.

His manner to the young lawyer was more ceremonious. Like James Oliver, who had succeeded in the medical practice of the neighbourhood the old doctor, to whom in the fashion of that day he had been first apprenticed and then partner, Mr. Topham too — whom old George remembered catching as a strippling after apples — had stepped into a dead man's shoes; and though he displayed a grip and acumen equal to his predecessor's and fully balancing in effectiveness that appeal of his brother-in-law's (though in a different walk of life) to popularity, one's temporal affairs are after all a nicer question than one's bodily weaknesses; so that it was perhaps not to be wondered at that old Fall's greeting of him should be less cordial than that he had accorded to the doctor, displaying indeed — in spite of extra politeness — not only reserve but a something that was curiously akin to dislike not untinged — if the idea was not ridiculous associated with such an one as old George — with fear.

That Mr. Topham's bearing under this temporary awkwardness was all it should be, goes without saying. So respectful that those who did not care for the lawyer might have described it as obsequious; or was it only merely a very excusable — what our Gallic neighbours call *empressement*, — a sort of over-eagerness, very natural perhaps under the circumstances, to dispel by a show of extra respectfulness whatever notion of distrust or dislike might be cobwebbing some remote corner of that old brain, getting very old, alas, and so much less clear than it had been.

Whatever the cause of this secret aversion of his, old Fall was not the man to withstand for long the lawyer's heartiness; nor, with that grand harvest field at the back of him, to resist displaying — naïvely enough but with child-like confidence — something of its abundant promise. He talked to sympathetic listeners. Like most of their neighbours in a district that was purely agricultural the tastes of both men, apart from their professions, followed the common bent. The lawyer had his herd of Alderneys, his half-dozen Southdowns, his fat pastures edging the river; whilst James Oliver's dream — like most dreams never to be realised but not without its consolation and its stimulus — was some moorland farm, to which, his work done, he might retire and end his days in a sort of patriarchal and no doubt delusive peace.

As the men talked the ladies drew together. Indeed before Mrs. Topham, perhaps to check George's gallantries (and being old friends and playfellows George considered himself privileged), or, reading in her husband's face a hint of marital displeasure, had already dropped George's arm and joined his sister, who, tall, thin, reserved, her dress of the severest, discarding crinolines and simulating fulnesses as for herself at least hypercritical and inconvenient, looked though the youngest the eldest of the three. And yet there was a kindness in Ann Fall's eyes, a benevolence in her manner, a sincerity in her speech that made her justly beloved by all those who really knew her.

Mrs. Oliver's manner towards her was polite, as Mrs. Oliver always was polite to her husband's patients, particularly those who could afford to pay a big cheque with as little ado as old Mr. Fall; but it was scarcely friendly. And indeed there could hardly be much in common between little Mrs. Oliver with her small aims

and hopes, her nursery full of children, her mendings, her struggles, her complaints and her gentilities, and this almost virile creature, full of potentiality yet cramped and bound by I know not what disabilities of her sex and of convention, and doomed in the end to look on passively at a tragedy these same things were to make her powerless to prevent.

But between young Mrs. Topham and Ann Fall there had been friendship of the closest from their childhood; and one that had so far triumphantly withstood the strain that marriage generally imposes on women's confidences.

Walking thus together they reached the spot where Jane and Mrs. Wint were working and the wooden cart with the sleeping child upon its heap of sacking.

It was Mrs. Topham, less used than Ann Fall to scenes like this and with keener intuition for the really beautiful than her sister-in-law, whose glance lit first upon the little group and halted at this rude cradle with something of tenderness mingling with her admiration.

"Look, Sarah; look, Ann. What a pretty child! How I should like to paint her."

And Mrs. Topham sighed, a sigh caused partly by the recollection of how her education had comprised the merest smattering of the fine arts; and partly because she knew quite well that if she had attempted to paint after her marriage, her husband might have been uxoriously indulgent, but old Mrs. Topham most certainly would have been indignant at what she would have considered in a matron an outrageous waste of time.

Mrs. Oliver neither noticed her sister-in-law's sigh nor the child. She had stooped to remove a wisp of straw, that was clinging to the front of her alpaca,

with the air of one to whom babies were no longer a novelty.

But Miss Fall, laying a finger one moment lightly on the child's cheek, spoke first to Mrs. Topham, then to the mother.

"Yes, she is a picture, isn't she? Is this the little girl, who was born after you came to us, Elizabeth?"

"Yes, mam," said the carter's wife.

"She looks very healthy," said young Mrs. Topham.

"She is very healthy, mam."

"The healthiest of them all, I think, don't you?" said Miss Fall with a glance at Jane. "Though the boys look well enough."

"There's nothing like the country for children, mam," said the carter's wife.

"You did not always live in the country then?" said Mrs. Topham.

"No, mam," said the carter's wife; and the "no" though perfectly respectful was so full of reserve, it seemed definitely to check any further communication.

"I hope we shall see you and the children at the Harvest Supper to-night," said Ann Fall pleasantly.

"I think not, mam," said the carter's wife. "The children will be tired; though I thank you"—she seemed to hesitate as if the homely phrase came lagged to her lips, "I thank you kindly."

"She seems a very superior sort of woman," said young Mrs. Topham, when they were out of hearing.

"So's rather a mystery," began Ann Fall. Mrs. Oller interrupted her.

"Your father's beckoning to us," she said.

"He wants us to join him at tea under the tree," said Ann, hastening her steps.

Later afterwards, when her children were growing

up, Mrs. Topham used to describe to them that afternoon in old Mr. Fall's harvest fields; and the supper that had crowned the day, when the last wain-load driven to the stack-yard, they had followed in one of the empty waggons under Master George's convoy.

Mrs. Topham used to speak of it not without a certain regret for a simplicity that even then was passing away (few of Mrs. Topham's compeers now-a-days would consider it a pleasure to drive in a farmer's waggon), and with some amount of glamour no doubt, which is as inseparable from one's remembrance of old fond things as the mists from a distant prospect or the glow that caps the hill beyond our bourne. But so vividly, so clearly, that Henry, the youngest of her children and the one to whom she told the story oftenest, could with little trouble picture the whole scene — the moonlight cold upon the naked fields, the ladies' laughter when the waggon wheels bumped over the uneven stubble, young George's boisterous driving, the press of harvesters in the narrow lane, alert still for all the hard day's toil and as triumphant as their master at its successful close.

And then the big barn with its long table, that had taken full half a dozen great damask cloths from Miss Fall's napery closet to cover it, its load of plenty that would not have starved a regiment, and the whole lit with candles, that guttered in the draughts and could not — for all they did their best — dispel the shadows that lurked in the recesses or light up the rafters and roof.

The guests, Mrs. Topham told Henry, had sat down in old-time fashion — the Falls and themselves above the salt-bellows in the ring of rustic faces, men, women and children. Some clumsy serving-maid spilled a jug of beer over Mrs. Topham's muslin dress — "so fortunate

it was not your Aunt Sarah's alpaca," though old Mr. Fall had reprimanded and Mr. Topham had frowned upon the culprit.

And how they ate — never had Mrs. Topham seen such trenchermen, — fowl, beef, mutton, rabbit pie all came alike to them and yet in no way had diminished the charms of the apple dumplings, that were borne in hot and smoking on pewter dishes. There was ale enough too — perhaps for some too much. Young George anyway had found it necessary to grip the table when he rose to propose "the Ladies." There were other healths drunk besides the ladies', — old Fall's — long life and health to him; young Fall — long life and health to him; the doctor's; old Fall's again. And then the cheering. That the barn stood it, that the candles did not all go out, that the horses in the stables hard by were not scared to death, that no one broke a blood-vessel, — Mrs. Topham still preserved a wonderment about these things though none of them had happened. Only a bat, roused from its slumbers, had let loose its hold upon the great centre baulk and had descended upon them, touching young Mrs. Topham's cheek with the chill of one of its ghostly wings and circling — it was said afterwards, since portents always gain exactitude from time, — circling three times about old George's head until Mr. Topham's handkerchief had driven it again into the shadows.

At her cottage door, Jane and her little sister already put to bed and sleeping with arms wrapped about one another, the carter's wife, standing looking out upon the moonlit night, heard the faint echoes of the cheering and, though her face was thoughtful, did not look displeased that Tom and his boys would be contributing their share.

CHAPTER III

MARY ANN

THE name of the baby we have seen sleeping so peacefully in its rude cart that afternoon in old Mr. Fall's harvest field was Mary Ann, without whom this story possibly would never have been written, and so with all due ceremony and as quickly as possible to be introduced to the reader.

Mary Ann — Mary after her paternal grandmother, long since dead and gone but of whom and more especially of the powers of her tongue her son still retained an affectionate though chastened remembrance; and Ann as a grateful compliment to Miss Fall, whose soups and jellies sent with due regularity from the farm — and when necessity called, Miss Fall, though thought by some to be over-careful, was a generous giver — had done much to restore the carter's wife to health.

I have before me as I write a torn and stained photograph. It shows a little girl in a plaid frock — the skirts full, the bosom low, the sleeves short, — holding in her arms (for effect rather pious than pictorial), a huge family Bible. Her short hair is brushed straight back beneath a ribbon snood; she has on white socks with buckled shoes, her only pair, and never worn save on high days and holidays; and her blue eyes (the blue had been added as an afterthought and is now faded) gaze gravely at me. It is Mary Ann at the age of seven, according to the photograph a demure little maid enough; according to the family chronicles a truculent little damsel, who though fairly submissive to her cate-

chism and her mother's rule, loved nothing better than to shirk her schooling for the stolen bliss of nursing a neighbour's baby or trundling it in its home-made copy of a perambulator (in those days considered a new-fangled and highly injurious mode of conveyance) along the country lanes. Later in life Mary Ann used bitterly to bemoan her sins of omission in this respect. The art of reading she did acquire but more from the interest of a huckster's book bought with hardly earned pence and conned in the winter firelight, than from the irate rule of the village pedagogue; but in that of writing she never gained much proficiency and when I knew her could hardly from lack of practice achieve more than the laborious signing of her name.

"Mother too," Mary Ann would say, "she weren't no scholar."

The first child to be born in the new district in which her parents had found a home and never — so Fate willed it — destined to quit its boundaries further than Burnthorpe, her thoughts to the very last harked back tenaciously to the little cottage that had seen her birth, to its diamond-paned windows that at sunset used to gleam like plates of burnished copper beneath the overhanging thatch; its long trim garden that was her mother's special care, and the peonies that used to bloom beside the gate. So she saw it — through memory's magic glass — to the end. And I, who went once for her sake to pay the place a pilgrimage, never dared to tell her of the changes I had found. — slates for thatch, glistening that day in the rain, which dripped monotonously into the spouting, painted bright red and evidently a recent addition; the old lattices reset with modern windows; the japonica — and such japonica had never flowered on any other cottage in the place — torn from the front, which had been

washed pink by the orders of a landlord keen on sanitation; and of all the flowers she had described to me in her mother's garden and that had so well repaid her culture as to be the envy and the admiration of their neighbours, of the roses and sweet-william, of the herb-bed, of the bush of lad's love — none remaining, except at the gate the clump of peony with one scarlet bloom, that seemed to sulk in the rain, the sole survivor of all those dear remembered things.

Of her mother — I never knew her, and Mary Ann only learnt to know her by the after-light of experience without which, indeed, liking is only instinct and admiration mere folly,— Mary Ann had many things to tell.

Of her comeliness — “eyes like sloes and a colour like a peach in youth,” the father used to tell the children, when the ease of the evening fireside had loosened his tongue,— such qualities had she to stir her husband's sluggish blood even after custom and possession might reasonably be expected to have staled them; of the rigorous fulfilment of the many duties which filled her daily life; and of her upbringing of themselves, never alienating their affection though showing a strictness that often made her husband, mild as much from weakness of will as excess of amiability, murmur an expostulatory — “Thou art too hard on the bairns, Bessie.”

And her retort.—

“If I am not hard now, they'll find the world harder later on.”

She often spoke thus in epigrams and wise sayings; wisdom dearly bought, none goes cheap, as Mary Ann learnt later.

She was an early riser. Five in summer, six in winter found her up and stirring. But though Mary Ann

was wont to relate the fact as a proof of strenuousness only, I am inclined to see in it not industry alone but that blind instinct, which urges us to crush beneath the weight of bodily fatigues those troublesome remembrances, those tags of old ambitions, which for this woman contrasting the might-have-been with the present's actualities—the sanded floor, the hobbledehoy children, the peasant husband with the stink of his stable-work clinging to his unwashed person—must at times, I think, have fretted her with some of Hell's own hopelessness; though her daughter summed up the commonplace result—the tidy house that was an object lesson to all who saw it—admiringly enough.

Possibly it was something of the same spirit, that made her when the choice to eke out their weekly livelihood lay between charring and fieldwork, prefer the latter, seeking in the open fields, beneath the ever-changing skies, amid the exposures of cold and rain, of tumultuous wind or burning heat—some antidote to the storms within her. A strange choice it seemed to Mary Ann, who ever favoured the boundaries of a kitchen.

A silent tragic figure, even as presented in Mary Ann's rambling talk, she has always seemed to me; "keeping herself to herself," as Mary Ann called it, in other words not even with her children overstepping for one moment those subtle yet impassable defences with which men guard the secrets of their souls.

Talk there was about her,—for the old tale she had hoped forgotten was wafted somehow into her vicinity and Mary Ann hazily remembered scraps of gossip that linked their mother with gentlefolk; but backed by no statement of hers, her children came to look upon it as idle gossip merely, the reflex effect of their mother's

singularity — and there was not, according to Mary Ann, her peer in the Riding — from her kind.

Indeed so little had the neighbours' talk impressed our Mary Ann that one day — years later — our Vicar calling upon her and prying after his wont into other people's histories, had asked her her mother's name.

"Bagster."

"Bagster!" repeated the Vicar dreamily. "That used to be a good name in this county once. How came a Bagster to marry a daytle-man?"¹

"You know that better than me, sir," demurely said Mary Ann.

"Indeed and how?" enquired the Vicar.

"You have been wed," said she, "and I have not."

Experience in this case however fell short of explanation and in vain the reverend gentleman had pressed for more particulars.

"Even if there had been ought to tell," Mary Ann said to me afterwards, "I would not have told him, but there wasn't."

And yet after all there was one scene in connexion with her mother's story, which must have impressed itself upon her childish brain however unimaginative; for though hustled by later events into the limbo of childish things and for some long while forgotten, later when an old woman, with the Present like some dark current rushing too swiftly by for one even to grip the facts of to-day, but with the Past clear like the sunlit reaches or placid backwaters of that same river, hurtling us so impetuously to soundless seas, she could recall with extraordinary vividness even to the detail of spoken words that same strange happening.

¹ Anglicè — day-labourer.

One day — it was washing-day — the children were at home eating their dinner of bread and dripping, when an elderly man came slowly up the path. The boys saw him first and so sure were they of his breeding in spite of his shabby clothes, that they ran and told their mother that "a gentleman from the Hall had come to see her."

Betty Wintersgill, once Elizabeth Bagster, went to the door, wiping the seeds from her arms, and at sight of her the stranger leaned against the lintel and burst into tears. I can see the little group now, the gentleman in shabby clothes weakly weeping, the tall spare woman, the group of wondering children, the youngest (Mary Ann no less) clinging to a fold of her mother's skirt, her thumb between her lips.

The woman was the first to speak.

"rather!" she said.

He wrung his hands.

"That I should see you brought to this!" he plained.

"That I should see you brought to this!"

"There is nothing to regret," she said coldly.

"Won't you walk in?"

He stepped gingerly and half unwillingly over the threshold; and his eyes, which were dark and quick like hers, darted from sanded floor to white-washed walls, from the coarse deal furniture to the homely children, from the children to his daughter, who had drawn forward a chair and was dusting it with her apron.

The shabby gentleman wept again.

"Don't," he said piteously. "Have you come to dusting chairs like any cottage woman?"

"You might have got your clothes soiled if I hadn't," she answered bluntly. "This is a kitchen and not a lady's drawing-room."

He drew the elder boy to him—"What's your name, lad?"

The youngster whimpered and his grandfather gave him an impatient shove.

"Send them away," he said querulously to his daughter; "the sight of them hurts me."

"You may go, bairns," said their mother, "it's school-time."

They went out—pushing and jostling one another in their haste to be quit of their grandfather's presence; their merry shouts telling of release the moment they reached the open.

One, Mary Ann, lingered, cowering behind the dresser.

"You have altered, Bessie," said the visitor.

"I am no longer young, you see."

He shook his head impatiently.

"It's not that. You look well enough and young enough considering that tribe of children. I suppose it's the life"—he glanced round shuddering—"Do you like it?"

His daughter folded her hands quietly.

"I have a good husband, good children, a good home."

"A goodly list."

Mary Ann saw her mother's hands twist and untwist in the lap of her blue check apron; and when she spoke, it was with difficulty, as if the thoughts that crowded in upon her choked her utterance.

"You need not sneer. Had I ever such a home as this? Ask your-elf that. Blows, shame, misery, rags to clothe me, scarcely food enough to feed me, and no one to take pity upon me or help me except one poor lad and the woman you treated almost as ill as you did me. To-day there is not one of my children but

can spell their chapter out or write their names. Can I," and Mary Ann never forgot the passion that trembled in her mother's voice, "Can I — your daughter — do either?"

"You blame me," he said. "It was no fault of mine. It was the damned luck that always went against me."

"I blame no one," she answered quietly. "I got a good man for my husband and that was the best of luck for me."

There was a pause in which Mary Ann's mother rose and shifted a pan of boiling clothes on the steel reckon. Then she sat down again, once more folding her hands, and waited.

Her father broke the silence abruptly.

"What does your husband do now?"

"He works at Mr. Fall's at the Howe." (It was young George, she meant, not his father, whose death had followed so quickly that grand harvest and the father's untimely circling.) "He has a good place. Such jobs as his with a good master and mistress are not so easy found."

The shabby gentleman shuddered.

"You even speak like them," he said irritably.

"Why shouldn't I speak like them?" she retorted. "What would you have made of me that I should set myself up above them? Besides," and her voice was bitter, "there are years between me and all that now."

He looked at her with a sort of cynical considering as if he were judging her by the flash of that same confession — years between her and all — not only what she had been but what she might have been, years of hard work and humble living that had left their mark upon her face, her person, and which, whilst leaving her still by a thousand subtle differences of tone and

thought at variance with the class she had joined, had yet completely severed her from that which she had left.

"Have you to work as well?"

"I do work."

"At what?"

"Fieldwork mostly. Cleaning up the land and such-like. It suits me better than being indoors."

"And the children — do they know nothing?"

"Nothing."

"You are bringing them up —"

"According to their station — what else can I do?"

"By their station you mean their father's?"

"Yes."

He shrugged his shoulders.

"You seem to have studied your catechism."

She did not answer him; and there was silence in which the father and daughter looked at one another over the bare deal table as if each were trying to discover the enigma of the other's thoughts.

"You cannot be happy," he said at last. "You cannot respect that man nor love those children. It's impossible!"

Mary Ann had crept from her hiding-place to her mother's side; and as he spoke, her mother seized her suddenly and drew her head down upon her knee, caressing it with both hands.

"If I spoke from now till doomsday," she said in answer to his words, "you would never understand."

"I suppose if you say you are happy —"

She interrupted him.

"What is happiness? These children," — Mary Ann pressed closer to her — "that man as you call him — they are mine."

He tried to coax Mary Ann to him.

"She is better-look' than the others and less rustic," he explained.

His daughter asked him to eat and placed a platter of bread and cheese upon the table.

He ate a little and drank a glass of beer, whilst question and answer passed between them upon things which Mary Ann did not understand and to which she afterwards found no clue.

But when he had eaten, her mother went upstairs, coming back presently with a little knitted purse in her hand that Mary Ann at once recognised as the repository for the family savings. This she emptied upon the table, pushing the silver it contained towards her father, whose skinny white fingers closed over it greedily.

"You are a good sort, Betty," he said as he put the money into his pocket, "I thought you wouldn't see me fast."

He got up and his daughter handed him his hat and stick.

"Well, good-bye," he said, holding out his hands, and then rapped out an oath so suddenly that Mary Ann jumped.

"Damn it!" he said, "but I'm sorry to see you here. I am by —"

Then he turned quickly, opened the cottage door and hurried down the garden path; and so — as Mary Ann and her mother watched him from the open door — out at the gate and out of their lives for ever.

CHAPTER IV

THE FIRST PLACE

WHEN Mary Ann was twelve years old she went to her first place. "To their station," her mother had said in speaking to the shabby gentleman of her children's path in life; and for as long almost as she could remember that station had foreshadowed for Mary Ann as its ultimate goal a state called "service"; a state which entailed the putting away of childish things, the assumption of symbols — such as — in a girl's case at least — caps and aprons and the doing of much hard work; a state which their mother had impressed upon them might be made honorable by faithful service; and which held tangible if inadequate reward in the weekly wages it was Mary Ann's ambition to share as Jane did with her family.

To service Jane had gone six years before and had left a gap in the house. Jane had acquitted herself well; and from being an odd girl of many duties had been promoted to the post of cook in a distant vicarage, where she suffered in silence all the keenest pangs of homesickness so that her mother and little Mary Ann might profit by her extra earnings. Mary Ann was devoted to Jane and always spoke of her as having been in every way infinitely superior to herself; also she died young which is the foundation of worship. On Sunday afternoons at the vicarage when her fellow-servants were out Jane, who never cared for going out nor that time for the young men who lure one out, used to remain in her kitchen by the fire and think of home. In after years upon her own table Mary Ann

used to keep a little Bible, that had belonged to Jane, and which during those lonely musings must often have lain open on her knees, for its worn pages were blistered and tear-stained.

Two brothers—Jerry and George—followed Jane as their turns came; and then the day arrived that Mary Ann left school and gathered her hair in an ugly knot at the back of her head: and after kissing farewell to the neighbour's baby and sobbing on her mother's shoulder set off, her hand in her father's, to her first place as kitchen-help (it was Mary Ann's ambition to become a cook like Jane) at Miss Fall's.

I have often wondered what the mother's thoughts were as in their several turns she closed the door upon her children. Some bitterness there must have been if she considered the promise at least of her own early years and contrasted it with that of these poor fledglings Necessity ejected so early from the parent nest. Bitterness but pity too,—pity when she thought of the coarse clothes (Mary Ann, poor child, was so proud of hers, the grey calico undergarments, the two print dresses, the four new aprons,—two better ones and two of dowlas—the black stuff dress that, if she did well, was promised for Sundays); pity for the humble lives to be bounded at the beck and call of master and mistress; pity, yet withal resignation and a certain grand outlook upon life that had enabled her not only to prepare her children for their lot but to instill into their heads something of that strange engirdling quality men call ambition and which may glow as warmly at the end of some lowly valley path as on great mountain heights or upon the mists that swathe them.

To the Howe, as Mr. Fall's farm was called, Mary Ann was no stranger. The grey stone house set between its garden on the one hand and its rick-yards on the other;

the well-filled stack-yards; the folds where the great steers were being fattened for the Christmas market; the stables that were her father's special pride and into which he coaxed her that day to stroke the muzzle of his favourite earhorse,—these things were as familiar to Mary Ann as their own cottage.

So too was the large kitchen that when she entered it still clinging to her father's hand, was all aglow and dazzling with light and heat and which seemed somehow—to Mary Ann at least—to put a climax upon the feeling of almost prodigal prosperity with which the farm impressed one.

There were in it two tall dressers set forth with crockery; a grandfather's clock ticked solemnly in a corner; Windsor chairs whose high polish reflected the firelight like a mirror; and two deal tables, one of which was covered with a coarse white cloth; and upon the hearth-stone, now mechanically stirring the great cauldron of calf meat that simmered there, now turning to direct the activities of a servant-girl who was laying out the men's tea, stood the no less familiar figure of Miss Fall herself.

She turned a grave and somewhat tired face to Mary Ann and her father; spoke to them kindly and asked the girl how her mother was. Then when she had listened to Mary Ann's pleased but embarrassed answering, she had dismissed her father and sent her upstairs with the serving-maid to take off her things. So began Mary Ann's first term of service, not without its mishaps as she herself used to relate to me. Her tender years and her innocence made her at once the butt of the farm lads and the scape-goat of the maids. If there were water spilt upon the flagged floor Mary Ann was said to have spilt it; or a plate found broken on the shelf Mary Ann was said to have

broken it; or a cheese cake missing from the dish Mary Ann had taken it; but after the first accusation and Mary Ann's sturdy denial Miss Fall in future accepted her negation without question and Mary Ann found her a just if not an indulgent mistress.

For Miss Fall, Mary Ann had soon conceived a rare admiration. She would watch her grave face eagerly for any sign of approbation and if, moved by that same silent esteem her mistress chanced to pat her plump white shoulders (and Mary Ann after the fashion of that day wore a low neck and short sleeves) it was sufficient to send her rejoicing for the rest of the week. "Shinums" Miss Fall used to call her playfully; and "Shinums" as a pet name stuck to her for long.

For her master, whom her father worshipped, Mary Ann had neither respect nor liking, thus showing how widely the opinions of the sex may diverge.

You, my tolerant reader, have already been introduced to Mr. George in his father's harvest field, where you found him dancing attendance — with some excuse certainly — on young Mrs. Topham, boisterously driving the ladies down to the barn in one of the big waggon and more than a little tipsy afterwards at supper. If I tell you that he had developed on the same lines ever since with emphasis of the special points — an almost equal affection for a bottle or a petticoat, a gay and youthful petticoat be it understood, no dowdy thing of wadded satin or red flannel; a rollicking spendthrift humour and a fine indifference to all those life-saving virtues which come under the heads of prudence or of thrift — you have Mr. George as he was at this period, not altogether unkindly, but with more or less disapproval, head-shaking and foretelling of coming disaster viewed by his neighbours. Not that Mary Ann either knew or shared the general

disapproval. Of Master George's adventures (amorous most of them and which would have shaken the shoulders of Boccaccio with delighted laughter) never the faintest echo reached Mary Ann, not only innocence itself but safe-guarded by a certain natural and inborn purity from any grosser influences that might surround her. What she resented in her master — and resented with a fierceness that matched her devotion — was the reaction of his doings upon his sister.

If I had time, I should like to linger here over Mary Ann's picture of poor Miss Fall, the brave woman, her youth thrust behind her, cares rushed pell-mell upon her, working early and late yet fated both by her brother's prodigality as well as her sex and the conventions of that day to do so ineffectually,—“sieve-filling” as she called it in moments of discouragement and bitterness; wrapped up heart and soul in the old house she saw perpetually at hazard; and equally devoted to Mr. George whom she shielded and helped repeatedly, though even in her relations with him a certain austerity and reserve of manner imposed its barrier and doomed her to a failure of influence that was almost tragic.

Tom Wintersgill shared his daughter's admiration for his mistress to the point of setting her upon a pedestal only a little lower than that occupied by his wife; but that did not interfere with his attachment for his master of whom he would speak long after circumstances had parted them and when Master George had become the butt of his sympathisers — with unswerving affection.

It was Wintersgill who, fulfilling as time went on more and more his old duties of groom as well as carter, used to escort his master to fair and market, achieving a mild triumph when he brought him home

sufficiently sober to handle the reins. He too it was who used to take the lanthorn and light Master George safely back across the fields when he tarried over-late at the Black Horse, a favourite resort and conveniently situated in a fold of the Howe lands. One day an angry widow appeared at the Howe, threatening that she would not leave it until she had had parley with its master and pinned him to a date for the marriage he had promised her. On this occasion it was the carter (simple man, by some, indeed, supposed witless), who, somehow or other managed to accost the lady, as she was making an inspection of the buildings in the hopes of finding Master George, though being stout as well as fair, the steepness of the ladders deterred her from mounting to the loft where he lay hidden, and succeeded so thoroughly in convincing her of his master's unsuitability matrimonially considered, that she had changed her mind and departed half an hour before Miss Fall, with Mr. Topham all judicial gravity beside her, had returned from Burnthorpe, whither she had driven to ask the lawyer's advice.

But tastes in common over and above the carter's humble services linked the two together perhaps more strongly. Their love of "hosses" was equal; and in this side of his master's character Tom found redeeming features not to be understood of women. George Fall himself used to tell it of the old man in later years how one night, sitting up together with a dying mare, the carter, the tears making deep channels in the dust and dirt that filled the wrinkles of his cheeks, had pointed to the mare's large limpid eyes fixed to glazing point with all an animal's dumb but eloquent affection upon her master's face and had said—no bumptious notions inflating his simple head of man's superiority to brute beasts,—

"Gaffer, if she nobbut goes to heaven and speaks a word to Him for you and me wi' eyes like yon, He'll be bound to let we'se in."

Such was the carter's creed — no bad one all things considered and possibly for giving comfort as efficacious as any other.

Mary Ann had now been three years at the Howe; and in those three years she had become not only quite a capable little servant but a very pretty girl, not unlike her mother in feature and colouring and with something of her mettle.

As she ripened thus to maidenhood beneath his very nose Master George began to take notice of her, cut her tit-bits at dinner which they had all together in the big kitchen in the patriarchal fashion of his father's time, chucked her under the chin when she served him his ale, and brought his great hand flat down upon her bare shoulder. In vain Miss Fall remonstrated with him; not all her watchfulness could spare the girl her baptism of fire.

The climax came one winter evening. Mary Ann had gone to the cow-shed,—"mistal," they call it in the dialect of those parts,—with a message for one of the lads who milked the cows. The byre lay distant from the back of the house some twenty yards or so; and to reach it one had to cross the yard, where Miss Fall fed her fowls, and enter the fold. The mistal was at the other end. In the dark Mary Ann made her way gingerly; the uneven cobbles were slippery with the rain, that had begun to fall; and a great heap of manure in the centre of the yard gave fragrant warning.

"Peter!" she called softly, peering into the warm odorous gloom of the shed. "Peter!" she called again, but only the clank of chains answered her, as some of the beasts turned their heads and gazed at her

with curious limpid eyes. Her favourite — she had often milked her when the men were extra busy in the hay-field or at harvest, lowed softly; and, stepping across the drain, she laid her hand caressingly on its warm flank. There was a man's step in the darkness and the next moment she found herself seized; someone was crushing her against his body, fumbling at her linsey bodice, kissing her protesting lips.

It was George Fall, waster and profligate!

With a scream and a struggle, the girl wrenched herself free and flew like a hare across the yard, bespattering herself with muck as she went. Miss Fall was alone in the kitchen, and, as Mary Ann entered breathlessly, she looked round in surprise.

"Why, Shinums," she said, "whatever's happened? Has Peter been scaring you?"

Mary Ann wound her arms round her mistress.

"Oh, mam!" she said, "it's the master. Let me go home — oh, let me go home!"

Miss Fall's sallow cheek flushed.

"What has he done?" she said sternly.

"Nothing," said Mary Ann — "only let me go home, I must go home."

Miss Fall looked at her searchingly; Mary Ann didn't flinch though she trembled.

"Go upstairs now," she said, "and change your dress. You are splashed with dirt from head to foot. To-morrow you shall go home."

And the next morning Mary Ann, with a note from her mistress in her pocket and in her hand her modest wardrobe enveloped in a red cotton handkerchief of her father's, went home to her mother.

Mrs. Winters-gill spelt out the note with difficulty and burnt it; then she drew Mary Ann into her arms and let her cry there on her bosom, washing away with

tears the allright to her innocence, her impotent passion, and her half-shamed consciousness of the implacability of natural law and the inevitable bodily submission.

CHAPTER V

IN QUEST OF A FORTUNE

WHEN her mother said she might stay at home that winter Mary Ann was nothing loth; and Jane, who lived in comparative luxury at the vicarage, wrote home envious of her younger sister's fortune.

"If thoughts could speak, mother, I should often speak to you."

During the week they were alone; for her father, now that he had become so necessary in his attendance upon Master George, slept at the Howe, only returning on the Saturday evening to spend the Sunday with his family, so that Saturday night was always something of a festival,—if the bright hearth, the dish hot upon the oven top in readiness for the little man's supper, the well-filled pipe, can be said to amount to such (it did to him); just as Sunday in those humble busy lives was made a long drawn calm.

And then one day in straightening out a sheet of newspaper that had wrapped some bloaters, Mary Ann saw an advertisement for the next-of-kin to the late Thomas Morton Bagster and dreamt in consequence the rosiest dream of her life and the last of her childish ones.

Thomas Morton Bagster was the name of the gentleman who had called and taken away the family savings on that memorable washing-day; and the advertisement stated that his heirs would hear of something to their advantage.

At first Mary Ann's mother was sceptical. To her it seemed to the last degree improbable that her father

—always notably luckless in that way—should at the end of his career come to have made money when he had been so long without it; nor did her last remembrance of him—shabbily clad and almost shamelessly eager to pocket the few shillings she had offered him—warrant any such supposition.

But with her memory sharpened by her daughter's eager questioning and catching too something of the infection of her excitement (and Mary Ann ever remembered the pleasant thrill the thought of money gave her,—warming on a winter's day when one had to look closely to sticks and coal), Mrs. Wintersgill did recall at last something of an aunt, her father's only relative and reported rich, who years ago had offered to adopt her.

Upon what her life might have been if the offer had been accepted it did not do to expatiate upon to Mary Ann; but the offence caused by the refusal—seeing that in those days it had completely severed any further communication—was now worthy of remark and not unsuggestive.

It was just probable that dying she might have relented and left her nephew some monetary token of forgiveness—*not* a fortune (this in direct negation to Mary Ann, whose fancy with all the buoyancy of youth had leaped ahead), *not* a fortune—she had relatives of her own—*but* a mourning ring perhaps with some odd pounds.

Mary Ann suggested promptly five; then, almost awed by her own daring, ventured further:

“A hundred, maybe.”

Mrs. Wintersgill shook her head and referred her daughter to the newspaper. Mary Ann read the advertisement aloud three times—her mother weighing each word—and then the address of the London so-

licitors to whom application had to be made. But still the older woman hesitated, fronting Mary Ann's bright eyes and eager face with the sober thoughtfulness of her own, heavy with doubt, with misgiving, but more than all with an intense and disquieting reluctance to the idea of probing once more into a past which she had done with or discovering to strangers the secret of her birth and hasty marriage. At last, however, she yielded to Mary Ann's solicitation at least to write and see what it was about; and no sooner was tea over (and it had taken three cups and all Mary Ann's arguments to prevail) than Mary Ann sat her down with a box of stationery, a new nib in the plaid pen that had been a present from Scarborough, and an unused bottle of ink. Afterwards Mary Ann never spoke but plaintively of the waste of note-paper in their house that night as her mother—a severe if unlearned critic—core up one letter after another, until the box was emptied and the poor scribe remained vexed and uncertain, pen in hand.

In the mother's mind lurked a doubt that a letter from Mary Ann—monumental 'bout though it was, only to be accomplished with squared elbows protruding lips, flushed cheeks, blots erased with meticulous care and lines obviously ruled—would have much weight with this London firm, who would probably throw the communication aside as some mare's nest unworthy their serious investigation even though a penny stamp were inclosed to ensure a reply.

And in Mary Ann's own hand the same notion that a "grand London solicitor" (grand is with us the poor's adjective for London, so roseate and vast is their idea of it)—would take no notice of her letter mingled itself with quickly passing resentment at her slighted powers.

Then suddenly the girl bethought herself of that summer's day when the widow's arrival at the Howe had made such a stir there and suggested:

"Mr. Topham, Mr. Fall says as he's the best lawyer in the country-side."

Then she added, prompted irrelevantly by some recollection of Miss Fall's rare tea-parties and her own secret survey of the guests from behind the passage door:

"I like Mrs. Topham best. She's such a nice lady. She used to come often to see Miss Fall when first I was there."

"We should have to walk to Burnthorpe," said Mrs. Wintersgill, "and it's a long way."

"Six miles," said Mary Ann.

"There's no carrier to-morrow," said her mother. "If we go we shall have to start early."

She bade Mary Ann put away her writing materials; and no more allusion was made either to the advertisement or to the suggested expedition to Burnthorpe that night, except when Mary Ann was about to get into bed, her mother called to her:

"You will say nothing about this to the neighbours, Mary Ann?"

Mary Ann shook her head.

"Neither now nor at any other time."

Mary Ann repeated the words.

"Promise!"

Mary Ann promised.

Next morning they were up betimes and dressing by candle-light. Mary Ann asked what clothes she should put on and was told her best. They drank a cup of cold milk and took some bread and cheese in their pockets and started whilst the dawn was still pink in the east. It was a bitterly cold morning with an east wind and the frosty road rang like iron to their feet.

They walked quickly and Mary Ann's spirits rose with the exercise. Talk she would of the fortune, though her mother checked her with many a head-shake.

The castles Mary Ann built were of very homely brick and mortar,—Jerry apprenticed to the drapery, which he fancied so much more than ploughing fields; poor pining Jane at home again, her father — old Tom had so few grumbles at life it was difficult to imagine any change that could add to his contentment unless perhaps it was the means of visiting just once before he died the Dublin Horse Show of which his daughter had heard him speak repeatedly and always longingly. Her enthusiasm infected the older woman at last,—not that she spoke much for her head was almost as full of schemes as Mary Ann's; and they climbed the hill into the town with throbbing pulses and heads cheerfully erect.

Mary Ann had not been in Burnthorpe since her childhood; but though that day she gave it but casual heed, later she was to learn it by heart,—the stone bridge over the river, the meadows that sloped from the hill above down to the water's edge; the grey houses and the grey church upon the hill; and behind them the dark outline of the moors and the inky shading of tree tops.

The lawyer's office was in the market-place. It was a little house, that had once been a shop; and its plate-glass window, whitened to the top, seemed to Mary Ann at once imposing and mysterious. The door stood open to a flagged passage with one room opening from the side and one at the end. That at the end had a green baize door with "Private" written upon it in large white letters. A small boy, muffled and mittened and who looked full of cold in spite of muffler and mit-

tens, came to them at their entry and told them they must wait a while, as Mr. Topham was engaged.

He showed them into the side office and they sat them down timidly upon a form, that was ranged along the wall. Two clerks, writing at their high desks, stared at them curiously over the railing that shut them in with their ink and papers. It seemed a long time to Mary Ann, unused to the stare masculine, before a bell tinkled and the boy with the chilblains reappeared to conduct them into the apartment marked "Private." In the passage they brushed against Mr. George Fall, too self-absorbed to notice even Mary Ann and with his ordinary ruddy face pallid and appalled.

Mr. Topham having dealt with Mr. George Fall—somewhat summarily it was to be imagined from the client's attitude as he had brushed past mother and daughter in the passage,—was picking his teeth, a habit of his which frequently accompanied judicial and other abstractions. Rather a dreadful gentleman when one was at close quarters with him, thought our Mary Ann—longing for a chance to run away and clutching involuntarily at a fold of her mother's skirt—short, squarely built, with pale heavy features, eyes slightly red-rimmed and much shaggy hair upon his head, about his chin, protruding from his nostrils, overhanging his eyes,—not exactly a prepossessing man though highly popular and at one time reported quite dangerous amongst the ladies.

"Well, my good woman, and what do you want with me?"

His manner was blunt almost to roughness; but Mr. Topham was a man of many manners according to his clients. We ourselves remember him most obsequious for instance that day in the harvest field to old George Fall. But though he addressed Mary Ann's mother with

that almost careless shortness, his eyes beneath their shaggy brows were bent upon her as if something in her bearing or person, modest and unassuming as they were, had excited his attention and curiosity.

Mary Ann's mother told her history; then opening her purse and taking the precious paper from it, rose and laid it on Mr. Topham's desk.

The lawyer drummed his fingers.

"You want me to act for you?"

"Please, sir."

"Why didn't you write yourself?"

The answer came after hesitation.

"I was ashamed. I have had no education. My daughter here tried to, but I thought perhaps they might take no notice."

He drummed the table again, looking at them the while from under his heavy brows. Then he spoke in sharp, quick jerks.

"Understand that if you come to me, I can't work on half measures. I must have all your confidence or none. Unless you are willing to give it, you may as well go home. I don't want my time wasted — time's valuable."

Mary Ann's mother said, "Yes, sir," timidly.

"The girl's your daughter, I suppose. Do you want her here or outside?"

"You had better go outside, Mary Ann."

Mr. Topham rose and opened the door.

"She favours you," he said to her mother. "What's your age, my girl?"

"Sixteen, please, sir," said Mary Ann.

"Well, run away now, whilst your mother and I have a talk about this grand advertisement, that as likely as not may only lead us a wild-goose-chase. If you have a fancy for nice new houses" — his whole

manner changed, his smile became genial, he rubbed his hands—"go down the street as far as the butcher's and turn up the passage there. When you come back you may tell me what you think of it."

Still smiling, he watched Mary Ann out into the street before he turned and locked the double doors.

He and Mary Ann's mother were alone. Old writers have it that the devil assumes many forms; had he entered into the respectable outward seeming of this elderly woman, Mr. Topham could not have been more potently tempted than he was that very cold, very ordinary January day.

Mary Ann in the meantime went as far as the butcher's, where she found the stone passage Mr. Topham had described. At first so dark and narrow was it, Mary Ann thought it might be a joke of the lawyer's and prove a blind alley. But having groped her way to the end, she found a wooden door, that yielded on being pushed and opened into what might some day be a garden but which had now the look of a builder's yard.

A narrow path between the bricks and mortar led to the house, which was still far from finished. It was a large house and its many paneless windows stared at Mary Ann like so many sightless eyes. Upon the slateless roof some half-starved sparrows were hopping from lath to lath. There was no one either in the yard or in the house; possibly the frost, thought Mary Ann, had delayed the builders; but the great pit of lime was stiff as if it had been left untouched for days, and more than a season's weather had stained the building. She went to the end of the garden, which was closed by iron gates securely padlocked. A little child peeped in between the bars.

"If Mr. Topham catches you he'll put you into prison," she said.

"Why, is it Mr. Topham's house?" said Mary Ann jestingly.

"It's Topham's Folly," said the child.

"Why do they call it that?"

"Because Mr. Topham begun it an' couldn't finish it," said the child. "Father says," she added sagely, "he didn't count the cost afore he begun."

Mary Ann retraced her steps and met her mother at the end of the passage. She looked tired and dejected and to Mary Ann's eager questions shook her head wearily. It might be money and it might not be money; and if it was money it might take money to get it; and at present they would go and get something to eat.

So they made their way to a little bake-house, where an old woman with a false front of brown hair was kneading dough behind the counter. At their entry, she wiped the flour from her arms, lowered the steaming kettle to the fire, and called to a young girl to come and prepare some tea. A woman came in with eggs to sell and stood leaning against the wooden partition, whilst the old baker counted them and then sought for change in her petticoat pocket.

"Yon's a grand new house John Topham's building for hisself," said the newcomer.

"Aye, indeed," replied the old woman, "John Topham ain't one to do a thing by halves."

"But I hear as he can't finish it," said the woman, with a short laugh.

"Such nonsense as folk do talk," retorted the old woman angrily. "Why, mark my words, they'll be up to it afore Easter."

"Aye, if he can squeeze the money out of some poor folk, I suppose he will," said the other, as she took up her basket. "I know John Topham to my sorrow."

To Mary Ann's mother who had listened anxiously, the old woman turned instinctively. "Don't you believe her," she said soothingly. "Her name's Lizzie Sharp and sharp she is — nought good nor sweet to say about anyone. It's a lucky body," she continued, plunging her arms into her dough again, "that gets everyone's good word. And it's my experience them that gets on a bit faster than their neighbours don't get good words at all. Come Michaelmas, I have lived in this town sixty odd years and I've known no harm against the Tophams yet. And if Mr. John have got on and if he do build hisself a house,— what for shouldn't he? He gives more to the poor than any man in all this parish. To-morrow it's a children's tea he's providing. I'm throng wi' the cakes now, an' there'll be no currants galloping one after another, I'll warrant you. There's never no stint with Mr. John — 'The very best,' he says to me, 'they're for the children, Becky,' he says, 'and I've been a child myself.' That's John Topham."

Thus, having finished their tea and muffin, Mary Ann and her mother started home again, carrying with them a consolatory picture of a philanthropist in currants.

The sky, that had been rosy-tinged in the morning, was dark and lowering now; and some flakes of snow whirled into their faces as they crossed the bridge. Night had completely fallen when they opened the cottage door and stepped into the unaccustomed chill of the fireless kitchen. Mary Ann lit a candle and its flame flickered drearily on the unhomely aspect of the place,—the undrawn curtains, the empty grate, the mugs, from which they had drunk their milk, still stand-

ing with the bread and cheese upon the table. Mary Ann's mother took off her bonnet and sat wearily down.

Whatever had been her dreams of the morning, it was clear they had vanished. Her face worked with some great inward convulsion as if the lawyer's insistent questioning, shattering the enforced calm of years, had loosed the devils of remembrance and regret and set them raging.

When Mary Ann turned from drawing the curtains, her arms were on the table and her face hidden upon them; and in all her life Mary Ann had never seen anything so tragical as that grey and shaking head. She knelt down and lit the fire.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH WE INTRODUCE MARY ANN TO A NEW PLACE

HER mother's despondency that night dashed effectually Mary Ann's belief in the fortune. She readily repeated the promise not to mention it to either the neighbours or her father, who, honest man though he was, was wont at the village ale-house weakly to overflow into all sorts of confidences and might thus, his wife feared, set the tongue of rumour clacking. And, as the days passed and no news came, a sort of shame as well as her own faith to her word constrained her to keep it. The weeks wore away towards March and brought no tidings; and then came news, that thrust every other consideration from their minds. Jane was ill and had to come home. Jane's mistress — the Vicar's wife — wrote the letter and wrote it very crossly. Jane had never complained and her mistress was vexed that she had not; Jane had been taken ill during the holidays and that was especially inconvenient; the doctor had ordered Jane to go home at once and that was most inconsiderate.

It was on a Friday morning that the letter came; and on the Saturday afternoon Jane arrived in the carrier's cart. I have a photograph of Jane as well as of Mary Ann; and it is by no means so pleasing. But Mary Ann has assured me that Jane's face, as, with the carrier's arms to help her and her mother's open to receive her, she climbed from the waggon, was that day and often afterwards, and always just before the end, like an angel's for beauty and rapt contentment. They led her half fainting into the house and placed her in

the high-backed Windsor chair; and when her strength returned, she looked from one to the other with shining eyes, murmuring, "Home at last, mother, oh, mother, home at last!"

Jane home it was necessary for Mary Ann to leave it; and the carrier was asked if he heard of a likely place for her to let them know at once. She had waited almost a fortnight when Mr. Topham called and was closeted with her mother for the best part of an hour, in the house-place whilst Mary Ann busied herself in the scullery and Jane went upstairs.

He had brought her some papers to sign, their mother informed her daughters after the lawyer had gone; she was telling Jane (who showed only a listless interest) about the legacy. As to the legacy itself all was yet uncertainty.

"There must always be preliminaries, my good woman, and preliminaries take time," Mr. Topham had said; and had treated his client to a legal disquisition, which had not only much befogged her at the time but which — her expectation subdued by Jane's uninterest — filled her when he had gone with doubt that, whatever the bequest might be (and the lawyer had promised nothing of much import) it would prove hardly worth the trouble taken or the sensitive pain imposed upon herself by Mr. Topham's arrogant manner and inquisitive questioning.

That day, when she had signed the last of the papers, Mr. Topham had asked for a glass of water, and Mary Ann was summoned to bring one from the pump. The lawyer, wheeling round in his chair, had observed her sharply and addressed himself to her mother in his own peculiar blunt fashion.

"You are rich to be able to afford to keep two daughters at home."

"No, sir, I can't. But the other is ill and this one wants a place."

"My wife wants a likely girl," the lawyer said, looking at Mary Ann thoughtfully. Then he threw half-a-crown upon the table. "That's her God's penny. Consider her engaged a month on trial and bring her over to-morrow."

Perhaps because it was her last at home Mary Ann lay wakeful that night, listening sometimes to the wind, sometimes to Jane coughing in the next room, sometimes to a more eerie sound still, for Jane was sleepless too and lay droning to herself in breathless fashion some familiar hymn.

The morning was well advanced before they made their start; for there had been two breakfasts to get and Jane to be left comfortable on the settle with all she might want at hand. She cried weakly when Mary Ann bade her good-bye; but Mary Ann was dry-eyed. Before she left the house she put a little parcel behind the caddy on the mantelpiece. It contained a pair of mittens for her father, who (and it wrung his daughter's tender heart) would know nothing of her going away until he came home from the Howe that night.

On the road neither she nor her mother spoke much; and both were glad when half way a butcher driving furiously as butchers do overtook them and offered them a lift.

They climbed to the bench across the cart beside him thankfully. He was a loquacious and curious man; so Mary Ann's mother told him her daughter was going to service at Lawyer Topham's.

"To Lawyer Topham's, is she?" he replied with interest. "Now you's a wonderful man. You ain't seen his new house, you say? Lor bless you, three months back all the folk in the country-side was laugh-

ing in their sleeves an' calling it Topham's Folly."—"Topham's Folly, indeed, I'll warrant they're laughing on the other side of their faces by this."

He let his hard-driven nag lapse into a walk.

"Why, three months back," he continued, waving his whip, "it seemed as far off being finished as the Tower of Babel. To-day it's as grand a house as you could wish to see. An' what's more it's all painted and papered an' aired an' them livin' in it, an' there's a garden that fair caps you to look at it."

He whipped up his horse.

"And so she's going to Lawyer Topham's," he said again, squinting at Mary Ann across her mother's knee. "Well, she'll have a grand house to live in an' what's more a good mistress."

"There couldn't be," he added after a pause, "a better woman or a better mistress than Mrs. Topham—but that Miss Mary —"

He reflected again.

"She's a darby now and she's but young. What she'll be when she's older—!" He whipped up his horse again and appeared outwardly to be chewing a spud of tobacco and inwardly tracing the development of Miss Mary Topham as a darby for the rest of the drive.

Great changes had indeed been wrought behind the wooden door since Mary Ann had seen it last. The unsightly heaps had gone; in their place were neat paving stones with a pump and behind the pump a clump of laurel bushes. Had they entered by the iron gates they would have found a carriage drive, a carefully laid out lawn, beds gay with crocuses, and an imposing conservatory into which opened the French windows of the drawing-room.

They knocked at the kitchen door; and a little boy

in a plaid kilt opened it and stood staring silently at them, until someone inside called out, "Come in."

It was not a large kitchen but everything in it was bright and new, and a savour of tasty cooking mingled pleasantly with the warmth. At a table near the fire an elderly servant in a mob cap and a spotless apron was making raised pies, which a lady at the other end of the table was filling with pieces of pork. The lady is Mrs. Topham, neither so young nor so pretty perhaps as when we saw her last in blue muslin and Dunstable bonnet, and stouter too; indeed Mrs. Oliver is in the habit of pluming herself upon the fact that, in spite of a dozen children as compared with Eleanor's three, she has retained a firmer hold than her sister-in-law upon that elusive thing, a figure.

At another table in the window a girl of about sixteen was primly cutting up more pork with a large knife. Her face was like her mother's but without the elder lady's kindness; and when Mary Ann and her mother entered she laid down her knife and glanced them up and down with cold curious eyes.

"It's the girl papa told you about," she said to her mother.

"Well, really," said Mrs. Topham, "when Mr. Topham told me he had engaged me a servant (whom I really don't want except that perhaps in this big house she will be a help to Ellen) I didn't believe him. He has never done such a thing before, has he, Polly dear?"

"Mama," said Miss Topham, "I will not be called Polly. It makes me feel like a parrot."

"My dear," said her mother amiably, "I didn't mean it in that way. I quite forgot. Henry, love, bring that chair out of the corner and ask Mrs. Wintersgill to sit down."

She turned to the waiting woman and spoke pleasantly.

"Mr. Topham told me your name and that your husband works for Mr. Fall at the Howe. Has he been there long?"

"Very nearly eighteen years now, mam," said Mary Ann's mother quietly, as she took the chair that the little boy had dragged forward with a great show of childish bustle.

Mrs. Topham looked at the speaker.

"I fancy," she said with a puzzled air, "I have seen you before. Have I?"

"Once, mam. But it was in old Mr. Fall's time. It was the day of the Harvest Supper. Miss Fall brought you into the field to see the leading."

"Now I remember," said Mrs. Topham, smiling again. "And the daughter you have brought to see me," glancing at Mary Ann, who standing uncomfortably beside her mother's chair felt herself the cynosure of all eyes, particularly of Miss Topham's, "must have been the baby you had with you in the field. Dear me, how very curious it is. Don't you think so, Mary, my love?"

"Indeed I do not, mama," retorted Miss Topham ungraciously, and added with an air that would have deluged a whole Psychological Research Society with cold water, "I never see anything in mere coincidence."

Mrs. Topham turned to Mary Ann's mother.

"Your daughter must be nearly sixteen?"

"She is turned sixteen, mam."

"She doesn't look it," said Miss Topham disagreeably.

"But it must be sixteen years ago since I saw her, Mary," said her mother. "You were a tiny thing too. You could just walk. I remember I wanted to take

you with us but your Aunt Sarah seemed afraid you might get restless and spoil her dress."

"I don't see why she should have thought so," said Miss Topham, showing unmistakable signs of resentment at this prohibition of sixteen years ago. "Her dresses are nothing to make a fuss about, I am sure."

"She looked exceedingly nice that day," said Mrs. Topham warmly. "She wore a grey alpaca, I remember, and I had a blue muslin. Your grandmama," and Mrs. Topham's voice held no resentment, "scolded me so because she thought it was an expensive dress. But it wasn't. It had hardly cost me anything at all. It was a wonderful day," and Mrs. Topham was on the point of launching into a fuller account — indeed, Henry, wide-eyed and eager, had already gone to her knee — when she saw Mrs. Wintersgill glance covertly at the clock.

"Has she been out before?" asked Mrs. Topham, returning to the subject of Mary Ann with exemplary directness.

"No, mam, she has been with Miss Fall ever since she was twelve."

"Really. Then I must have seen her there though I can't recall her."

"I have seen you, mam," said Mary Ann shyly.

"I daresay you have," said Mrs. Topham good-naturedly and with — it is possible — a perfect comprehension of that secret survey from behind the passage door. "Miss Fall and I were at school together and we have always been good friends, though I have not seen much of her lately, I don't know why."

Mrs. Topham sighed, a look of trouble like a passing cloud affecting for a moment the repose of her pleasant face.

"If she was so long at the Howe, why did she

leave?" asked Miss Topham in the business-like way that seemed to contrast so oddly with her youthful appearance.

The two matrons glanced significantly at one another; then Mary Ann's mother replied respectfully, though with a certain dignity which showed Miss Topham's manner had pricked her pride:

"Through no fault of her own, miss, and through no wish of her mistress's."

She turned to Mrs. Topham:

"It was all arranged so quickly, I did not think of asking Miss Fall for a reference but she would be pleased to give you one, I am sure."

"Oh, I think it is quite satisfactory," said Mrs. Topham, "don't you, Mary?"

Miss Topham shrugged her shoulders.

"Just as you like, of course, mama," said she, with a manner that above all things expressed the gravest doubts.

"Shall we consider it settled then?" said Mrs. Topham to Mary Ann's mother.

"You would like to stay, would you, Mary?" her mother asked Mary Ann; and at that moment the little boy, who had been gazing at her solemnly from beside his mother's knee, came and put his hand in Mary Ann's and said:

"I like you."

"Look at that, Polly!" exclaimed Mrs. Topham in great delight, "Henry has taken to her already."

"That's nothing unusual," retorted Miss Topham disdainfully, "Henry takes to everyone. He did the same to a tramp woman last week."

"You would like to stay?" said Mrs. Topham to Mary Ann.

"Yes, please, mam."

"If you are a good girl and try to please me, I am sure you will be happy. The work is not hard."

"Nonsense, mother," said Miss Topham sententially, "work well done is always hard."

"It isn't your fault if it is made any easier at any rate, Miss Mary," said the elder servant dryly.

"About her night out, mam," said Mrs. Wintersgill. "I'd rather she were not let out at night if you did not mind. But if she could come once a fortnight on a Sunday whilst Jane is with us, I should be much obliged."

"I think we could manage it?" said Mrs. Topham to the elderly servant.

"If you are willing, I am willing, mam," said the elderly servant.

"It's perfectly ridiculous," objected Miss Topham. "Why, she will be away the whole day."

"It will only be for as long as we have Jane with us," said Mrs. Wintersgill appealingly to Mrs. Topham.

"And where is Jane going?" said Mrs. Topham.

"Home," said Mary Ann's mother, and to Mary Ann's fancy the silenced kitchen had in it the rustling of wings.

"You must be hungry after your long walk," said Mrs. Topham, after they had settled the question of Mary Ann's wages, which were not large. "If you will come into the next room with me, you shall have something to eat."

They followed her into a small parlour, where presently the elderly servant brought them bread and meat and some tea. Mary Ann showed a good appetite but her mother seemed unable to eat. Mrs. Topham sat near them. She had turned down her sleeves and taken

up some knitting; and as she knitted she talked with homely sympathy about poor Jane.

When Mary Ann had finished, her mother rose and, curtsying, thanked Mrs. Topham for her kindness and said she must be going.

"But won't you wait for the carrier," said Mrs. Topham, "he goes at four."

Mrs. Wintersgill shook her head. She was anxious to be home and she would get there sooner than he would, for what with parcels and passengers, he was often considerably belated.

"You would like to go with your mother as far as the bridge, I know," said her new mistress to Mary Ann, who accepted the suggestion gratefully.

They walked almost in silence out of the little town until they reached the bridge, where both instinctively stood still. The river wound golden through the meadows towards the mill, giving back the gleam of the western sky; they could see behind the church the same mellow reflection burnishing the distant moors and gilding the slated roofs.

Before them her mother's path lay across the meadows, a narrow thread that left the fields at the little station and was lost in the road between the high brown hedges. From a thicket by the water's edge a blackbird was whistling his evensong.

"Mary Ann," said her mother, "if you don't think you will be happy and content there, come back with me. We aren't so poor that we couldn't keep you a little longer."

"You liked the lady, didn't you, mother?" asked Mary Ann timidly.

"I did."

"Then," said Mary Ann, "I think I'll stay."

"I don't think you'll regret it," said her mother.

And a minute later the one was trudging across the muddy fields with her face set to the darkening sky, and the other was climbing the hill back to the little town all rosy and fantastical in its borrowed glory of fading sunlight.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH MARY ANN GAINS SOME INSIGHT INTO THE FAMILY OF TOPHAM

WHEN Mary Ann got to the house,—“Belmont,” Mr. Topham had named it—Mrs. Topham and Miss Mary had left the kitchen, the tables were cleared, the hearth swept, and in the back kitchen the elderly servant was scrubbing the various knives and boards, that had been used for the pork-pie making.

She called to Mary Ann to put on a harden apron out of the left-hand table drawer and come and help her, which Mary Ann accordingly did and was told at the end of her task that “she framed well however.”

She shewed the girl her room and then left her there with instructions to make herself tidy preparatory to helping with the tea. It was a small room, opening into a larger one in which Mr. and Mrs. Topham slept; and side by side with Mary Ann's wooden bedstead and its patch-work quilt was Master Henry's brass cot.

Mary Ann changed her dress and went downstairs. The elderly servant handed her a cloth and went with her into the dining-room, a large but somewhat gloomy room furnished heavily in the prevailing fashion of mahogany and horsehair. The most comfortable chair in the room was Mr. Topham's, who was sitting in it when they entered, whilst Miss Mary was kneeling on the rug taking off his boots. In the opposite chair sat a pale-faced young man of about twenty, though an incipient beard made him look older than he really was. He glanced indifferently at Mary Ann and his father stared at her.

"So you've come," the lawyer said gruffly, and Mary Ann in her nervousness nearly dropped the cloth.

"Yes, sir," she said timidly.

Mr. Topman smiled grimly.

"I thought maybe that your mother with her high-flown notions about this legacy might have kept you to starve at home."

"Yes, sir," said Mary Ann again, not knowing what else to say.

Mr. Topham looked at her consideringly.

"I say," he exclaimed abruptly, "what do you think of it?"

Mary Ann, who didn't know what she thought of it, stared at him helplessly and said nothing.

"In my opinion," said Mr. Topham with rough decision, "it's all stuff and moonshine — naught but stuff and moonshine. And what's more," he added with the same impetuous ruggedness of speech and manner, "if it were to be the fortune yon silly mother of yours thinks it is, what good would such folk as you do with it? You'd waste it and scatter it, anything but garner it, I know you!"

Mary Ann felt she was expected to say something and said "Yes, sir," for the last time.

Mrs. Topham came in then with little Henry clinging to her skirts. She had evidently been out and it was wonderful how young she looked with a colour on her face.

Her husband addressed her angrily.

"What's this Thackary tells me about you ordering two braces of pheasants from him?"

"They are for to-morrow's dinner, love," said Mrs. Topham. "Your sister Sarah and four of the children are coming: and I thought it would be a little treat for them, poor things."

Mr. Topham grunted wrathfully.

"A treat indeed! It's a treat for my pocket. Sarah and four hungry brats set down to pheasant! A good bellyful of beef (Mr. Topham could be coarse in his expressions as his wife knew) would have done them as well and I'll be bound they don't often get it. But pheasants — why, it's eating money."

"We can have beef instead if you wish, love," said Mrs. Topham.

"No, you won't," retorted her husband. "Pheasants you have ordered and pheasants you'll have. Only don't do it again — my pocket," and Mr. Topham tapped the side of his trousers warningly, "won't stand it."

Mary Ann went out and returned with jam and a dish of pastry.

"Being William's last Sunday too," Mrs. Topham was saying, "I thought that he would like them."

"My dear mother," said William, with a haste that showed not so much ingratitude to his mother as the wish that his father's attention should not be drawn upon himself, "mutton or beef would have done quite well for me."

As it was Mr. Topham fixed his eyes upon him.

"And what," he asked in a voice ominous with some secret meaning, "were you about this afternoon, sir?"

"I went for a walk," said William, not looking at his father but at the hearth-rug where his sister had paused in the act of fitting on her parent's carpet slippers apparently to enjoy his discomfiture.

"Alone?" said Mr. Topham.

"No!" blurted William, "I was with —"

"I didn't ask whom you were with," said his father, chuckling grimly. "I asked if you were alone."

William looked relieved; and at that moment the eld-

erly servant entered with a dish of sausages; Mary Ann was sent for hot plates; a cold ham was put upon the sideboard; and she and the elderly servant left the room.

"Don't call me 'mam,'" said this person, when to an offer of bread fried in sausage fat, Mary Ann had replied "Yes, mam,"—"my name is Ellen Thorpe—Miss Thorpe to most commoners but Ellen to you."

After tea Mary Ann was summoned upstairs to assist his mother to put Master Henry to bed. He and Mrs. Topham were already in the room, where a fire was burning cheerily.

"Close the door quickly," said Mrs. Topham nervously. "Mr. Topham does not believe in fires upstairs. But Master Henry is so delicate, he really needs one these cold nights."

The undressing in the firelit room was a pretty sight, as I think, indeed, are most such ceremonies. Master Henry looked a picture after his bath with his glowing cheeks and fair hair rubbed into tiny curls, and his mother looked so happy too, as she played with him until she was out of breath and finally, folding his tiny fat hands between her own, made him repeat after her his childish prayers.

"Don't be frightened," she said to Mary Ann, "if you sometimes hear me here in the night. I often come and look at him as he sleeps."

"Why do you come, mummy?"

"Because I love you," she said, locking him in her arms, and Mary Ann felt as she watched them that she was bound to them for life.

The next day was Sunday. Ellen showed her her tasks and Mary Ann found them no harder under her direction than work had been at the Howe.

She helped her mistress to dress Master Henry, and after breakfast she was called upstairs to put on Mrs. Topham's boots.

As she stooped to her task, Henry ran in crying, pursued by Miss Topham.

"Muvvy, she's got my picture-book."

"It's fairy tales and he's not to look at fairy tales on Sundays," said Miss Topham.

"My dear Polly," said her mother conciliatingly, "why do you tease the child so? Let him have his book."

"William and I were not allowed to read fairy tales," protested Miss Topham.

"That was my fault,"—Mrs. Topham should have said "my husband's"—"I know better now. Give him his book, Mary."

"Why can't he play at Church?" protested Mary.

"I'm tired of Church," wailed Henry. "There's no one to come to Church."

"Polly will play at Church with you until the bell rings," said the mother.

"But Polly won't let me say the sermon. And I want to say the sermon like a clergyman," said Henry.

"And what sermon would you say, Henry?" asked his mother fondly.

He looked at her half slyly.

"Be a good boy and love my mama."

"That isn't a sermon," exclaimed Miss Mary scornfully.

"I wish it were a sermon you might always remember, Henry," said his mother wistfully. But even as she drew him to her and held him in her arms, he beat her on the bosom with his little hands impatient to be free.

The door was opened roughly and Mr. Topham came in, his face above his snowy collar and black tie surprisingly red and angry.

"My love," his wife exclaimed in some alarm and put Henry to his feet, who promptly ran from the room.

"You add expense to expense, Eleanor," said Mr. Topham stormily. "There's Ellen actually lighting a fire in the drawing-room."

"My dear," replied Mrs. Topham apologetically, "it's only once in a way and the room wants airing. I'm sure it's no use having things spoiled by damp."

"But why light it to-day when Sarah's coming? Do you want it turned into a bear-garden? Am I to buy handsome furniture only to have it knocked about by Sarah's children?"

"My love, Sarah's children are not ill-behaved. And besides it is not for them, I was really thinking of the young people."

"What young people?" enquired Mr. Topham suspiciously.

"William and Marion," murmured his wife timidly. "From what you said to William yesterday I thought you had seen —"

"I have seen nothing," interrupted Mr. Topham testily. "If you mean that he was walking with her, I had no idea of it."

"He said he was not alone, dear," said Mrs. Topham diplomatically.

"It strikes me you are losing your senses, Eleanor," replied her spouse dryly. "If you think that I should sanction William's marrying a penniless girl and an Oliver into the bargain, you are mistaken, very much mistaken."

"She is very sweet and good, John," pleaded Mrs. Topham bravely.

"She may be anything she likes," retorted Mr. Topham explosively, "but William doesn't marry her. However, if there is any nonsense of the kind going on, it is as well you told me. I shall certainly put a stop to it and very speedily."

Mr. Topham left the room and his wife resumed her interrupted toilet.

"Mary Ann, my bonnet, please. It's in the hat-box on the wardrobe shelf."

She spoke firmly but her hands trembled as she tied the strings; and when it came to the veil,—“I can't see,” said poor Mrs. Topham, blinking the tears from her eyes.

And yet, when twenty minutes later she walked down the church aisle on her husband's arm, there were not a few simple undiscerning folk but followed her with envious eyes; and the thought that if there was a fortunate woman in Burnthorpe it was Mr. Topham's wife mingled itself with their initiatory devotions.

Amongst them—and she had followed her sister-in-law's progress through the interstices of her locked fingers—was our old acquaintance Mrs. Oliver.

The difficulties of marshalling her progeny into their places invariably sent Mrs. Oliver to church a full five minutes before everyone else; and to-day as she rose from her knees her thin face was fretted with cares, cares that, so long as the parson's bell rang and behind and about her was the shuffle of entering feet, busied themselves somewhat in this fashion—“Would Martha be able to manage the dinner in her absence at Belmont? Wilfred really must have another pair of boots! Was her own turned silk too shabby to go in to Eleanor's? It was a pity Marion, poor child, could not have had a new pelisse this winter but at any rate”—and Mrs. Oliver's face brightened—“she looked

pretty enough in her old one, quite the prettiest girl in Burnthorpe Church."

The bell ceased; the Vicar intoned "When the wicked man"; and Mrs. Oliver with an admonishing glance at her offspring rose with the congregation. A commonplace little figure enough she looked in her much turned brown silk, a cheap chip bonnet trimmed by the Burnthorpe milliner and a cashmere shawl that must have been a perpetual cross to one who knew that dolmans were *de rigueur*, commonplace and yet for some of those who knew her story not without associations of romance.

A runaway match had been Mrs. Oliver's. Who would have thought it or could imagine her now — all young, glowing and in tears — stealing out of her mother's house in the early morning and down the hill to the bridge where James Oliver — to-day a model of professional decorum and a churchwarden — was waiting for her in his gig. They drove — not to Markington as was suspected and whither young John Topham had pursued them — but, doubling on their track, had gone leisurely through the clear June morning uphill towards the dales where in a certain tiny grey church the knot had been tied a full hour or more before old Mrs. Topham in a considerable state of perturbation, in which amazement at Sarah's daring almost equalled her indignation, had sat down to a belated breakfast.

Such was the romance; but, though on certain summer mornings association might thrill the chords of remembrance for the principals at least, to outsiders it might long ago have lost its significance had not old Mrs. Topham forbidden her daughter to enter her house again and kept her word.

Fate seemed to have ranged itself on the side of Sarah's outraged parent and had dealt somewhat

harshly with the culprits. James Oliver had been old Dr. Fawcett's assistant when Sarah Topham had eloped with him; but though in course of time the old man had retired and her husband had succeeded to the practice, Mrs. Oliver had found herself little better off than before, for the practice though large was not lucrative and their family, as we have seen, had grown apace.

Marion was the second child, and looking at her and knowing her mother's story one might almost fancy that all that had been beautiful in her parents' escapade — love, daring and surrender — had expressed itself in this girl, so pretty and so full of spirit that our Mary Ann, catching a glimpse of her as she and William — all unwittingly — followed their elders down the drive, thought her the loveliest young creature she had ever seen.

Obedient to a signal from her husband when they reached the house Mrs. Topham took her guests up the back stairs; the front staircase in Mr. Topham's house — and very finely appointed it was with costly carpeting, polished balustrade and a stained glass window — being reserved for rich relations and distinguished visitors only.

"I do wish I could make my children use the back stairs at home," sighed Mrs. Oliver, as Mrs. Topham, holding on to a young Oliver's petticoats, toiled breathlessly after her — the back stairs were both narrow and steep, — "I've tried to but it's not a bit of good. They run up and down the front staircase in spite of all I can say. And now the carpet's so worn I am quite ashamed of it. Over and over again I've tried to save to get a new one but it's no use. With twelve children to bring up and educate there's no money left for carpets."

"John doesn't often go up your stairs, does he?"

asked Mrs. Topham, as she recovered her breath on the landing.

"The last time he went up our stairs," Mrs. Oliver replied with circumspection, "was when James had his accident. And that was just before little Annie was born."

It was Mrs. Oliver's habit to measure time by the births of her children — a plan that was apt to puzzle those not acquainted with the chronology of her numerous offspring.

"Annie," repeated Mrs. Topham reflectively and making a mental calculation — "is six and a half so it will be nearly seven years ago."

"I was thinking," continued Mrs. Topham, "there is the carpet from our old house. It is too narrow for the front staircase here and it is too good for the back. If you wouldn't let John know, you might have that if you liked."

"I'll send the man round for it on Thursday when John's at Markington," said the little woman briskly, "and I'm sure it is very kind of you, Eleanor, though if I were as well off as you are, I know I should like to do kind things too."

It was one of Mr. Topham's observances on Sundays to summon his servants to the dining-room when dessert was served, and make them drink each a glass of wine. It was a custom that gratified the recipients and gave to Mr. Topham the air and feeling of having done something particularly meritorious and benevolent. When Ellen Thorpe and Mary Ann entered the room that Sunday afternoon, Mr. Topham was standing at the head of the table.

"Before we drink," he said — and Ellen Thorpe laid a warning hand on Mary Ann's arm — "I'm going to propose a toast. To-morrow my son, Mr. Wil-

liam, is going to London. He is going there," continued Mr. Topham, waving his arm,—"thoroughly to master his profession so that in time he may be a clever man, a successful and—I hope and trust—a wealthy man. Now I have heard, no matter how," here Mr. Topham smiled blandly at his wife, who began to look anxious,—“that a certain young lady well known to us all, though I must not mention names,”—here he looked at Marion Oliver, who raised her face, turned suddenly pale, and kept her dark eyes proudly fixed on his until the end of his speech,—“a young lady.” repeated the lawyer a little lamely, “who has some hopes that my son William,” he stumbled more and more,—“that in short—both entertain ideas that—er—that never can be realised—I say—that never can be realised,—let us drink to William.”

Mrs. Topham, all confusion, spilt her wine; Mrs. Oliver, evidently misunderstanding, nudged William slyly in the ribs; Miss Marion, taking her eyes at last from her uncle's face, merely touched her glass with her lips; whilst the other Oliver children, who so rarely tasted wine and besides the wine had their plates heaped with almonds and raisins, thought their Uncle Topham the kindest man in the world.

“Mary Ann,” said Ellen Thorpe, when they were washing up, “run out to the pump, as if you were getting a glass of water, and tell me who that is behind the laurels.”

Mary Ann went obediently. Someone was sobbing there as if her heart would break, and, through the boughs, Mary Ann caught a glimpse of Miss Marion's laced boots and the grey flounces of her merino dress.

She went back and told Ellen Thorpe and the old servant left the kitchen. She returned carrying Miss

Marion's felt bonnet and her cloak and went out with them.

Later Mrs. Topham came into the kitchen.

"Ellen," she said softly, "where is Miss Marion?"

"She has gone home, mam," said Ellen Thorpe

CHAPTER VIII

JANE

WHILST Mary Ann in her new place was learning, not without much innocent surprise, that one can have much money and little happiness; that one can own a fine house and yet hide an aching heart; that the worries of poverty may be as featherweights compared with the burden of riches; to agree in short with Ellen Thorpe's oracular dictum, "that wealth does not make an easy pillow,"—in spite of the fact that the best pillows at Belmont were stuffed with the finest down procurable,—Jane, her sister, was slowly but surely descending, sometimes painlessly, sometimes with agonies, the narrow way, whose end is by men called Death.

On Mary Ann's first leaving home, Jane had rallied for a time, so much so indeed that her mother began to cherish the delusive thought of her recovery; and Jane herself talked hopefully of "being well and about again come Summer." The respite was short-lived. Whilst it lasted, she had helped cheerfully with their little household tasks; but even the lightest became at last too heavy for her wearying hands. She had always been reserved; "If thoughts could speak, mother, I should often speak to you." Thoughts with poor Jane had ever been more eloquent than words; and now, as Death crept to her side and bided there, she seemed to wrap herself about in silence.

She was austere too; and the first Sunday Mary Ann came over from the Tophams', Jane spied a bright ribbon she wore and chid her severely for yielding to this

world's vanities; and of them, in Jane's limited experience, a simple ribbon might flaunt a telling part.

Mrs. Topham had given this particular ribbon to Mary Ann; and Mary Ann liked pretty things, ribbons especially, when she could get them, or rings out of a prize-pocket; but she heard Jane (for which she was ever afterwards thankful) with patient gentleness and, removing the offending ribbon, placed it in the family Bible as a book-marker. To Jane, though she had no eloquence to clothe the sentiment with words, this was the fitting completion to Mary Ann's little sacrifice,—to yield all one prizes most to the one All Dominant Being, as she, who had so besought Him, was now yielding her life.

In this later stage that marked simultaneously the declining of her bodily strength and the ripening of her spiritual beliefs, she would sit often a whole day with two books on her lap, sometimes reading, sometimes remaining with eyes shut, whilst her mother moved about the house on tiptoe, unwilling to disturb her.

One of the books was the Bible, that just before her death she gave to Mary Ann: the other I saw one day by chance on Mary Ann's table and so was told of its associations.

"The Dairyman's Daughter" it was called; well known I daresay to the pious of that day, though Mary Ann confessed to me frankly, she herself had never had the patience to read it; and I, turning curiously its dog-eared leaves, did not more than glance it through. But Jane, Mary Ann told me, had seemed to find strange comfort in it, and I do not marvel. The dairyman's daughter was dying as Jane was dying. She had been a sinner, as also Jane esteemed herself a sinner; and so these two poor blind children spoke one

to the other; they groped their way in the same valley of shadows; they wrestled with the same doubts; and, in the end, for both, Faith triumphed.

When Summer came, her mother used to carry the great Windsor arm-chair into the porch and Jane would sit there silently, watching the sun shine and the bees that buzzed about the scarlet fuchsia in the corner of the bed.

"Of what was she thinking?" her mother used to wonder,— "so young and so near death. Was she resigned or beneath that meek and still exterior did not the poor heart sometimes beat in impotent rebellion?"

I have from Mary Ann a little incident, that shows me the sacrifice was not then complete. She was sitting thus one day, when a neighbour's child came running up the path and put some roses he had gathered in her lap. The child was full of life and glee; the roses were red with life and loveliness. Jane rose, her face made suddenly terrible by passion, thrust the child from her down the path and threw his flowers at him over the gate. Then she tottered back to her chair and, sinking down in it, buried her face in her hands and sobbed desolately. The child, frightened by her violence, never came to the house again; but the next Sunday that Mary Ann was there, Jane gave her half-crown and begged her to buy with it as fine a toy as Burnt's rpe could provide for the money.

There was still another scene, but it came — perhaps mercifully — nearer the end; and in all probability Jane had long steeled herself to face it.

One afternoon they were sitting quietly in the house-place, when someone rapped at the door. Mrs. Wintersgill opened it. A young man, dressed in his Sunday clothes, stood on the step, a large bunch of hot-house flowers in his hand.

"Is Miss Wintersgill at home?" he asked.

"If you mean Jane," replied Mrs. Wintersgill, thus soberly reminding him of her station in life and his, "she's inside."

As he followed her in, Jane sat bolt upright in her chair, flushing feverishly.

They shook hands without a word.

"I've brought you a few flowers," he said at last.

And Jane, laying her fingers on the bright blossoms, replied tremulously, "How pretty!"

Her mother found something to be done in the scullery and left them, closing the door behind her.

"You aren't no better, Jane?" the youth said, when they were alone.

"I shall never be better, George," said Jane.

He held out his hand and she took it, repeating like an oft-conned lesson, "I shall never be better."

They were still sitting hand in hand when Mrs. Wintersgill came in again.

"You'll have a cup of tea?" she said hospitably.

Unable to speak he shook his head, released Jane's hand and, awkwardly, loth to go, half crying, he rose to his feet.

The one to speak was Jane.

"Good-bye, George," she said bravely; and he answered as well as he could,— "Good-bye."

When he had gone and they had heard the gate fall to behind him, Jane rose and made her way, stair by stair, to her room. Her mother could hear her heavy breathing—like a sob—as she went; and, as she listened, she held her own.

There was no sound in the room above for some time. Then as Mrs. Wintersgill, growing uneasy, was about to call her, Jane came down. Her mother drew

her to the fire and, kneeling on the rug, chafed her cold hands between her own.

"Who was the young man, Jane?"

"The gardener, mother."

"Were you long acquainted?"

"He was there when first I went to them."

"Did he keep company with you?"

Jane's lips quivered suddenly.

"Yes," she said. And her mother, kneeling beside her, knew she had drained her cup of suffering and resignation to its dregs.

That Sunday after her sweetheart's visit was the last one on which Mary Ann saw Jane alive; and when she went back to Belmont she carried Jane's Bible with her. On the Wednesday afternoon she was seized with a kind of fit, in which she lay motionless and like death above an hour. Even when she rallied, she was for a long time exhausted and unable to speak.

It was not until the next day, that, as her mother was attending to her comfort, Jane suddenly laid her hand upon her arm.

"Mother," she said earnestly, "yon was no fit. I was caught up. I was at heaven's gates,—and, oh, the gates of heaven, mother, they are hung on a big gold swivel and they are as easy opened as our own garden wicket."

From that morning her faith, calm and steadfast, never wavered. It pinned itself upon this vision,—and visions such as these — a commingling of faith and fancy, of pious imagery and homely association — have comforted greater than Jane and been by them as steadfastly maintained as true as Jane herself upheld that hers was so. "The Dairyman's Daughter" was under her pillow but she never opened it again. Like the

pilgrims of old, she had thrown aside her props and earthly aids and walked those last steps supported only, — call it by her delusion if you will, or as she did, — “the Everlasting Arms.”

On the Saturday, when her father came back from the Howe, she was too weak to speak to him; and that night both father and mother watched beside her bed. And often she lay so still that the woman or the man would rise stealthily and taking the candle, pass its light across her face to see if she still breathed.

A new day had begun when, suddenly, she roused herself in bed; and the colour and the beauty, that had so transformed her face of late, overflowed it like a flood. She looked beyond their heads to where the sun was playing upon the whitewashed wall; and thus rapturously gazing, it may be only at that same sunlight or, as her mother afterwards maintained, at some last dream, with which the finite brain mocked perhaps the dying fancy, she fell back into her mother's arms and, her head resting upon the breasts that had suckled her, gasped and died.

Some three weeks or so before Jane's death, Mrs. Wintersgill received her legacy.

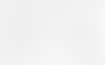
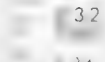
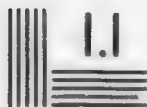
It proved as she had thought a bequest from her father's aunt, Miss Mary Morton, and though by no means equalling Mary Ann's first glowing expectations (it was only thirty pounds and would have been less, as Mr. Topham pointed out, if he had not most generously foregone his due fees), it seemed something of a godsend to Elizabeth Wintersgill, who was thus enabled to provide poor Jane with many a little delicacy and extra comfort. And when at last the end came and the residue was divided — unequally it may be said — between paying the doctor's bill and the purchase of a grave to hold Jane, and also one day herself and her

husband, Mary Ann's mother put the whole transaction from her mind and never again alluded nor suffered Mary Ann to allude either to Miss Morton, her father or the advertisement.



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CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH ARE DESCRIBED SOME RADICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE FAMILIES OF TOPHAM AND OLIVER

It was one of the Oliver children who nicknamed his uncle's new house the "Palace of Forbidden Pleasures," and there was an aptness in the name to which Mary Ann, before she had been very long at the Tophams', could heartily have subscribed.

There was almost everything at Belmont that the average mind could desire. Handsome furniture, costly china, good pictures, books in abundance; and yet with the exception of Mr. Topham, who had purchased everything and to whom that thought alone gave unlimited satisfaction, no-one else, it seemed to Mary Ann's shrewd perception, was ever allowed really to enjoy them. Except when there were visitors, sheets of brown paper covered the drawing-room carpet, linen wrappers shrouded the chairs; and the door was locked to all except Ellen Thorpe with her pan and broom and Miss Mary, who entered once a day to dust the china. No one played upon the grand piano, nor dallied with the albums, nor looked at the pictures, nor read the gorgeously bound books. Even in the dining-room the books in the chimney cupboards were all best books, and in best covers, and must on no account be read.

Mrs. Topham, who was fond of reading, obtained all her literature from the Burnthorpe Library, whence on the strength of her husband being a munificent subscriber, she procured a double supply of such tattered, dog-eared, well-thumbed veterans, that the Belmont

books at sight of them must have positively turned faint. Miss Mary Topham considered reading waste of time. She liked the look of having books; she was very proud of their books, but she was never moved with any insatiable curiosity to open a book; and if she read at all, which was seldom, it was a cheap novelette borrowed from Miss Forbes, the Burnthorpe dressmaker.

Two laws, one of parade and the other of parsimony, regulated the house. For "*company*" (as was the Burnthorpe way of expressing entertaining) there was enviable display of china and fine linen; though that in ordinary use, to Mrs. Topham's secret shame, was hardly one whit less coarse than the poor damask and delf on many a cottage table. Miss Mary Topham indeed went so far as to have two sets of undergarments, one of unbleached calico and without trimmings, for home—and the other of lawn (with what lace Miss Topham's puritanical mind considered advisable) to wear on those very rare occasions when she went visiting.

Fortunately for Mary Ann, the "bests" that possessed the house and which made a speck of dust on the carpet or a chair out of place a mortal sin, stopped at the kitchen door and troubled neither her nor Ellen Thorpe. Of the Topham family as was natural, these domestic indictments irked Miss Topham and her father the least and Mrs. Topham and Henry the most.

There was no nursery for Henry. Mr. Topham had considered it a waste of room; and though he was rich in toys, they were "show" toys, and he was only allowed to play with them on state occasions, when purblind and dazzled visitors would exclaim ecstatically, "What lovely playthings! What a lucky little boy." His mother did her best for him. On wet days she sup-

plied him with endless fashion books out of which he used to cut the ladies and arrange them in families on the carpet, and woe to him if his sister or Mr. Topham found a snippet of paper when the game was done; or they played at oddly dumb bears with never a growl and no chairs to be moved, or later, which was best of all to Henry, she would gather him into her arms and tell him tales in whispers to prevent Miss Mary overhearing and crushing them both at thrilling stages by her customary remark "What nonsense, mama!"

When it was fine, he played, still with all noise, shouting and other childish manifestations forbidden, in the yard, drawing up and down its gravelled path a crab shell to which his mother had fixed a string and which more than rivalled in his affections the magnificent waggon yoked to horses with real skin, which was locked in his mother's closet.

On the whole a better time began for Henry with the advent of Mary Ann. To get her work done quickly so that she might take him out away from the prim garden and the things he must not touch became Mary Ann's mission in life; and as the year waxed to summer what a world was that they had to play in! There were the holms on each side of the brown burn, where the turf was soft and the thickets shadowy and the glades long paths of light; and in the river amid its brown shallows and deep pools, what strange creatures lived,—darting trout, sluggish bullheads, myriads of minnows and green crayfish that crawled laboriously along. "to market," so said Mary Ann.

Often they went further to where the bold shoulder of the moor tempted one to climb to see the other side. It was only more moor after all—moor and green bracken: but they could lie hid among the bracken and watch a whole unconscious world at their feet. Men

working in the fields; cows grazing in the pastures; and best of all the slated roofs of their own grey town and the smoke wreaths among which it pleased them to loiter and guess their own.

On other days, but these were rare, for his sister had a theory that Henry's misdemeanours always followed afterwards, they would join the little Olivers in their father's fields. There were nine of them at home then, including Miss Marion, whom Mary Ann often saw walking alone upon the moor. Mary Ann was always interested in the Olivers and never could see, as Miss Topham declared it did, that their society did Henry any harm, other than an occasional rent in his clothes.

As Mrs. Oliver, unmindful of her special mercies as are most of us, often lamented, there were no such laws at their house as at Mr. Topham's. There the children romped as they would, played indiscriminately with their toys old and new, and in the quaint walled garden that was James Oliver's special pride, each had their own little plot to do with as they liked. The furniture in the Olivers' house was shabby with long usage; the carpets (even in the drawing-room) were losing their patterns; the piano's ivory keys were yellow with age and use; the books, save a row of pious tales, that were Christmas gifts from Mr. Topham, had been read and re-read. In short the Olivers' house to Henry seemed a land of freedom and delight.

Mrs. Oliver herself took a great fancy to Mary Ann and more than once asked her if she would go to her as nursery-maid should she ever leave Mrs. Topham. Mrs. Oliver always seemed to be sewing in those days, either on a rustic seat in one of the fields or at the nursery window upstairs; sometimes patching, sometimes fashioning out of garments the elder children

had outgrown others for the next in age; sometimes altering a bundle of Miss Topham's discarded clothes to fit her younger girls.

Miss Marion might have worn her cousin's things as they were, but refused. "She would go in rags sooner," she hotly said.

Mary Ann was often told in those days she would never stay at Lawyer Topham's. "No one ordinarily human could stand that there Miss Mary," the girls told her, whose acquaintance she made at church; and of Ellen Thorpe and her particular ways they thought the same. Miss Mary certainly was trying. If she came into the kitchen to iron some of her muslin frills or make a cake, there was more work made for Mary Ann than that of an ordinary baking or washing day.

Fortunately she was away for part of that summer; and every day Mary Ann grew fonder of Henry and more attached to Mrs. Topham.

And though under the first shock of Jane's death and later when it seemed as if her duty were nearer home, she tried to make up her mind to leave, always at the last moment the courage to do it failed her.

As an old woman and looking back, "It seemed," she often said, "as if the Lord put and held me there."

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH THE READER IS INTRODUCED TO THE ELDER MRS. TOPHAM

MARY ANN had not been long at Belmont before she made the acquaintance of Mr. Topham's mother. Mrs. John had been making sponge cakes and Mary Ann and Henry were commissioned to carry the old lady the best in a basket. Mrs. Topham lived in the Market Place in a little house with a granite front, a green front door and two lower windows with brown wire blinds. Behind the green door and the brown wire blinds the house was a chilly though less gorgeous replica of Belmont but without any counteracting influence, knowing no comely woman's face nor child's fresh voice. The chill of it struck you at entering; it followed you up the passage with its unnecessary drugget on the carpet; it pursued you into the small sitting-room, that might have been so comfortable and which was so comfortless; it seemed to culminate in the straight thin form of the old woman sitting knitting in her high-backed chair, her bloodless face with its sharp features framed in a stiff border of starched net, her sleeves always a little short displaying the beaded mittens that ill-disguised her bony wrists. Master Henry was always restive when she kissed him. He said she bit him and certainly the action was accompanied by a **very significant click of the jaws.**

A little spare woman dressed in black with a great deal of crinoline and chignon and, in spite of both, the air of a starved sparrow, opened the door and hopped before them to Mrs. Topham's presence. Her name

was Miss Mallaby. She was old Mrs. Topham's companion, servant, maid, general factotum, anything in fact but a menial. "Mallabys were never menials," she used to tell Ellen Thorpe and Mary Ann. "If Mrs. Topham didn't understand this, I couldn't bring myself to stay with her a day."

She stood by, whilst Mary Ann presented the sponge cake, and seconded the old lady's resolution to take tea with her daughter-in-law that same afternoon.

"And you might call at Dr. Oliver's on your way back and tell Mrs. Oliver to be there as well," said old Mrs. Topham to Mary Ann.

Mrs. Topham as you already know had never forgiven her daughter's marriage. She permitted James Oliver to pay her a professional visit once a month as she had no wish, she declared, to bring a rival practitioner into the place; but Sarah she had not suffered to cross her doorstep since her marriage day. It was her daughter-in-law who had brought about their first meeting; and ever since her house had been neutral ground.

Mary Ann found Mrs. Oliver in the nursery sewing. Miss Marion was sitting in an arm-chair by the window, nursing a baby by the simple expedient of letting it lie unheeded across her lap whilst she read a book. Mary Ann caught a glimpse of her pretty discontented face behind the book and saw on it traces of tears.

"Yes, I should like to go," said Mrs. Oliver in martyred tones, "but I can't. Nothing would please me more but pleasure is not for me. I like pleasure," concluded Mrs. Oliver almost in tears. "Who doesn't? But I never get it — I never can."

Miss Marion looked up.

"Of course you can," she said.

"How can I?" said her mother. "Who is there

to mind the children? Only this morning you let little Wilfred fall downstairs."

Miss Marion put down her book and the baby and did what, though Mary Ann, Miss Topham never would have done, she went and knelt beside her mother and drew that poor lady's harassed face down to hers.

"Do go, mama," she said, "do trust me. I do so want to be trusted."

"There's no harm in Marion," Mrs. Oliver was saying to her sister-in-law that afternoon, having arrived in good time with a paper bag that she laid aside, and a very shabby velvet one from which she drew some sewing,—“She is really a good girl at heart; but lately she has got so restless, so fretful, so impatient with the children, that I don't know what to do with her.”

"Perhaps she wants a change," suggested Mrs. John. "Let her stay with me for a while."

"I don't think she would," said Mrs. Oliver dubiously. "She can't bear her uncle. She says she wants to go away. But how am I to send her? And if she goes away—with all those children—and nearly all of them boys—what am I to do without her?"

"There's your mother coming," exclaimed her sister-in-law rather hurriedly; and both watched the procession down the drive, the old lady walking ahead, leaning on her stick, behind Miss Mallaby, bearing her cap-box.

Old Mrs. Topham pecked her daughter much in the same way as she pecked Henry.

"How d'ye do, Sarah? And what are you crying about? Oh, don't tell me you have not been crying for I know you have and you deserve to. What else could you expect when you married that man!"

Having thus delivered her primary grievance and

leaving Mrs. Oliver no time to reply, she turned to her daughter-in-law.

"You look well, Eleanor, but you have no business to be so fat."

"I know, mother," agreed the younger Mrs. Topham apologetically.

"Then you shouldn't," the old lady said sharply. "It makes you cumbersome. Mallaby, my cap, and don't stand staring."

Mrs. Oliver had rushed up to her mother and was taking the cap from Miss Mallaby's hands.

"I used to put on your caps once, mama," she said wistfully.

"You may have done it once upon a time," retorted the old lady, "but you do it very badly now. Mallaby, straighten my cap and leave the room."

Miss Mallaby did as she was bid.

"And now," said old Mrs. Topham briskly, as she spread a handkerchief over her knees, "what were you two talking about as I came in?"

"About Marion, mama," said Mrs. Oliver.

"And what about Marion? She isn't ill — is she? I saw her at church on Sunday and I said to Mallaby, 'that eldest girl of James Oliver's looks like a dairy-maid.'"

"Mama!" exclaimed Mrs. Oliver indignantly.

Her mother chuckled delightedly.

"Like a full-blown rose if you like it better," she said.

Young Mrs. Topham who had looked apprehensive, breathed again; and Mrs. Oliver repeated her tale, winding up with the fall of little Wilfred downstairs.

"Change indeed!" said the old lady. "She wants whipping. I have always told you, Sarah, you spoil your children and one day you'll rue it. One would

have thought you had had so many you would have learnt wisdom, but apparently you haven't."

"Perhaps," replied Mrs. Oliver humbly, "I don't understand her. I often think I don't. She is so different from other girls."

"She's a true Oliver," said the old lady viciously. "All your children are more or less Olivers, Sarah; the only one that's anything of a Topham is Wilfred and he isn't much."

"I can't help it," meekly replied Mrs. Oliver.

"No, of course you can't," said her mother. "If you could you wouldn't have married as you did and against my will."

Mrs. Oliver sighed.

"But she got a very good husband, mama," said her sister-in-law quickly; and Mrs. Oliver brightened visibly. She was too apt to regard her marriage through her mother's spectacles, particularly when in that lady's company; and it was soothing to be told what she knew already but sometimes forgot, that James Oliver was a good husband.

"Now about Eleanor's Mary," said old Mrs. Topham, pursuing her favourite topic. "There is no mistake, she is a Topham through and through. When that child stayed with me during Eleanor's illness, 'there's an old head,' I used to say to Mallaby, 'on young shoulders.' Mary Topham is like what I was as a girl."

The younger Mrs. Topham sighed inaudibly. She blamed secretly that visit to her grandmother's for many disagreeable traits in her daughter's character.

"The long and the short of it is," said old Mrs. Topham, folding up her knitting as Mary Ann appeared with the cloth, "this talk about change and not understanding Marion is all tomfoolery. What she wants

is a tight hand, do you hear me, Sarah? — a tight hand, and no nonsense."

They had tea in some silence. At its conclusion Mrs. Oliver opened her paper parcel and produced a new cap.

"I made it myself, mama," she said timidly, "so I hope you'll like it."

"I like it well enough," her mother said ungraciously, "but I should have thought you hadn't time to waste over caps, Sarah."

"It didn't seem to me waste of time, mama," replied Mrs. Oliver.

"Perhaps not and perhaps yes," said her parent oracularly. "If you think to bribe me with caps, Sarah, you are mistaken. I made my Will the day you left my house for James Oliver's and I haven't altered it and I don't mean to. And I may tell you this, your name won't be found in it."

Mrs. Oliver burst into tears.

"You are very hard, mama," she protested feebly. "But, indeed, when I made that cap, I had no thought about your Will, although I will say (without wanting you to leave us, for I don't) — only that if there was a little to look forward to some time or other, it would be the greatest comfort. With our family," concluded Mrs. Oliver, "you don't know the comfort it would be."

"I dare say," said old Mrs. Topham grimly.

"You will always think ill of me, mama. You always did and you always will," said poor Mrs. Oliver, as she dried her eyes and prepared to bid good-bye.

"No, I don't," said old Mrs. Topham with an unexpected amiability, that changed her daughter's tears to a watery smile, "it's a very pretty cap and I am much

obliged to you. If you'll promise to take it yourself and not be a silly, I'll send you down half a dozen bottles of port. You look as if you needed something to pick you up."

"Oh, thank you, mama," said Mrs. Oliver gratefully, and again kissing the old lady, who this time returned her daughter's embrace with more affection than she had yet shown her.

"Sarah was always a fond silly thing," she said to her daughter-in-law as Mrs. Oliver, strangely cheered, walked off briskly down the drive, "I did my best to prevent her marrying that man. But marry him she would against all sense and reason. And stealing out of my house like a thief to do it too. It was *that*, that hurt me, Eleanor. If they had only waited till I gave them leave —"

"But you told them you never would, mama," protested young Mrs. Topham.

"I only meant to try them," retorted the old lady, "love isn't cooled by waiting, is it?"

"No," said her daughter-in-law, smiling, "just the opposite, I think. Perhaps that did the mischief."

"Oh, you may smile," replied old Mrs. Topham, but not ungraciously,—"but look how much better it would have been for Sarah if she had waited. Look at the family she's had — and nearly all sons. And such a puny creature as she is too. Why, she didn't look well even to-day."

"She is not well," said young Mrs. Topham meaningly.

"Sarah's a fool!" snapped the old lady impatiently.

Mrs. Topham pulled her chair closer to her mother-in-law. If she hadn't been quite so stout, I fancy she

would have knelt; as it was she came near enough to take one of the old woman's skinny hands between her white plump ones.

"You were only joking, were you not, in what you said to Sarah about the Will?"

"And what is that to you?" old Mrs. Topham asked suspiciously.

"Nothing to me," replied Mrs. Topham quietly, "but if it is true it will mean wrong to Sarah. And she doesn't deserve it, she doesn't indeed."

"I made my Will when he left home," the old lady replied stubbornly, "and there it is and there it stays."

"No, no," pleaded Mrs. Topham, "Sarah was not a bad daughter to you. You know she wasn't, mama."

"Has she put you up to this?"

Mrs. Topham shook her head.

"And if John gets the benefit, what do you say then, eh?" asked old Mrs. Topham.

"I say we have enough," said her daughter-in-law.

"John may not think so."

"John thinks too much about money," said young Mrs. Topham.

"Sarah shouldn't have married that man," the old lady repeated querulously. "There they are with too many children and as poor as church mice."

"I tell you what I will do," she added abruptly, as young Mrs. Topham did not speak. "I'll have that girl, Marion, to live with me and it will be one mouth less for them to feed."

Mrs. John's face was a study in dubieties; but she could say no more, for at that moment Mallaby entered in a flutter of mincing bustle to have her mistress shawled and away before the dusk.

CHAPTER XI

MR. TOPHAM AS A CHARITABLE MAN AND —

IN August Mr. Topham gave a treat for the school-children. Ever since Mr. Topham had been prosperous he had given two children's treats — one in summer, the other at Christmas.

They had become with him and with his family almost a religious observation, and their dates canonical.

There was always, as you have heard, an abundance of cakes ordered for these ceremonies — plain cakes but with plenty of currants and the best of their kind; Ellen Thorpe brewed the tea and brewed it strong; the milk came from Mr. Topham's own cows; the sugar was bought at wholesale prices from the Burnthorpe grocer; Mrs. Topham and Ellen Thorpe cut the bread and butter — preferably when Miss Mary was out of the kitchen; and friends and admirers of Mr. Topham sent supplementary cakes and pastry.

There was always much talking, mostly by Mr. Topham, before the feast; and louder talking after it by a dazzled township.

"I won't have anything but the best," Mr. Topham would say, bustling into the kitchen. "There must be no stint at any entertainment of mine," — (this was a public function, not a dinner for poor relations in the privacy of Mr. Topham's dining-room) — "management with generosity, Eleanor, when you are cutting the bread and butter, remember that."

"Mama simply piles it on," said Miss Mary Topham, alluding to the butter.

After the tea Mr. Topham made a presentation. Generally he gave Bibles — Bibles in green covers, in black covers, in red covers, in large print, in small print. Bibles one could carry in one's pocket and others that were hard to lift.

Mrs. Topham, a week or two before the treat, broached the subject timidly.

"What will you give the children this time, John?"

"Bibles, of course," said Mr. Topham.

"You have given Bibles for so many years now," said Mrs. Topham, "don't you think it is almost too many, love?"

"People can never have too many Bibles," said the lawyer.

"They can put them on their tables," said Miss Mary Topham, who to her dying day had invariably a handsome Bible in the best possible condition exposed on hers.

"I was thinking," said Mrs. Topham diplomatically, "that to mark our coming to this new house, it would be nice to make a little change."

"I don't see that that matters at all," said Miss Topham, and added quite candidly, "Bibles are cheap."

"Mary," said Mr. Topham reproachfully, "on these occasions I don't count the cost. Bibles are good, that is why hitherto I have given Bibles. If your mother has a better suggestion to make, let her make it."

"I don't say it is better, John," said Mrs. Topham still guilefully, "only a change."

"Well, and what's the change?" Mr. Topham asked testily.

"Thimbles," began Mrs. Topham.

"Thimbles!" echoed Mr. Topham; and Miss Mary was heard to mutter disapprovingly.

"Thimbles and scissors for the little girls," continued Mrs. Topham bravely, "and knives or marbles — or something of that sort — for the little boys."

"Not marbles," said Mr. Topham severely. "I desire to give useful things, Eleanor, not toys."

"They'll cut themselves with the knives and swallow the marbles," prophesied Miss Topham with great cheerfulness.

"It will cause extra trouble," remarked Mr. Topham, "and" — with heavy jocularity — "as Mary foresees, knives and scissors unless wisely distributed may only prove a source of danger and sticking plaster."

"But I don't mind the trouble, love," said Mrs. Topham, "and I should of course make the present suitable to the age of each child."

"The mistress is quite right," said Ellen Thorpe, who until that moment had been an interested auditor, "folks can have their homes fair littered up with Bibles and be no better for them. There's the Bradleys now — they've got twelve children and to my own knowledge," — here the elderly servant smiled grimly at her master — "forty-eight Bibles. Will Miss Mary or anyone else tell me what folk can do with forty-eight Bibles?"

"Read them," said Miss Topham.

"They can't read 'em all at once."

So thimbles it was, bright thimbles that looked as like silver as thimbles could; and scissors and pretty pincushions for the elder girls; and for the younger, in spite of Miss Mary, who had discarded dolls at a very early stage of her existence and thought them the greatest nonsense, there were dolls of all kinds, from babies in long clothes to sailor-boys and fair-haired, emotionless ladies in muslin frocks and ribbon bows. For the boys, — but Mrs. Topham knew very well what

boys like and in choosing for the younger ones was ably guided by Henry.

Indeed the approaching treat imparted a feeling of pleasant cheerfulness to every member of the Topham family.

To Mr. Topham it lent the same glow of seeming benevolence that the Sunday glass of wine to his servants was wont to give him. But so much more intensified that from the crown of his head to the toes of his neat boots he seemed to radiate philanthropy. To Mrs. Topham it afforded the rare pleasure of full yielding to her bent (which was always charitable) without fear of incurring marital displeasure; and over the preparing of her little packages her kind face beamed.

Miss Topham knew that she would preside at the tea-table, that the gratification of shaming a small child before its fellows for over-eating would almost certainly be hers; and that upon her it would depend to choose the games and decide upon the winners. So Miss Topham, at the prospect, so far modified her disapproval of her mother's innovation in the way of gifts, that she even helped her — sealing the packages and addressing them in her own neat clerklike hand, which was so much more legible than Mrs. Topham's feminine but untidy scrawl.

As to Henry the festival had for him the double importance of falling on his seventh birthday; and Ellen Thorpe was to make him a cake, that he could cut and divide among the children as he listed.

The day came and was not wet, as Miss Topham had prophesied it would be, but hot and fine with no clouds except white down in a sky that was deeply blue behind the moors, whence the weather-prophets looked for rain to come.

At three the children assembled in the Market

Square, each with its mug and all in their best clothes, their Sunday stockings of white cotton, their newest jackets and unpatched trousers. There Miss Topham and her father, with Henry in white duck and Mary Ann in her new mourning, met them and led the way to one of Dr. Oliver's fields, where the tea was already spread in tents, and an honourable company assembled.

The Vicar, who knew how to cherish a rich and moreover charitable parishioner, was ubiquitous, saying grace first at one table and then at another, lauding Mr. Topham, complimenting Mrs. Topham, extolling Miss Mary Topham and patting Master Henry Topham graciously upon the head; whilst his two daughters had each an honourable post behind one of the big brass urns.

Old Lady Metcalfe from the Hall arrived in her pony chaise driven by a cousin, who had lived with her so many years that custom had at last disarmed scandal, though once the newsmongers and evil-speakers had buzzed pretty thickly about their unheeding ears. When the fat ponies stopped at the field gate, the cousin who was long and lean and had a stooping gait, gave his hand to the old lady, still pretty and a coquette at seventy, and together they went round the tables, speaking to the children, praising the cakes and finally taking their places at a small table that had been reserved for Mr. Topham and his guests.

All the little Olivers were there with Marion evidently taking charge. Mrs. Oliver had stayed at home; but the doctor came for a few minutes to the small table and drank a cup of tea standing by his sister-in-law; and whilst he stood there old Lady Metcalfe bid him call his pretty daughter up to speak to her.

Marion came, blushing and a little defiant, but look-

ing for some almost indefinable reason the prettiest and best-dressed there in cotton frock she had made herself, and a simple bonnet trimmed with ribbon. "A dressed-up doll," Miss Mary Topham called her; though her own muslin and tartan ribbons were much finer.

Old Mrs. Topham had been as good as her word and had sent for Marion the day after her visit to Mrs. John's; and Marion had gone unwillingly but passive. Mrs. Oliver, poor woman, had been delighted. If her mother would not leave her a legacy, she might — Sarah hopefully pondered — do something substantial for Marion; and money left to Marion, Mrs. Oliver knew, would not be without benefit to the rest of her family.

So Marion went and found existence not only duller but infinitely harder behind those green shutters and brown wire blinds than ever it had been in their own noisy poverty-stricken household. If she wanted to read she must sew; if she would sew she must read; sometimes she must sit in the dreary parlour and do nothing, which to her active, restless youth was a state intolerable; when she went out her time was limited and her walks planned; nor was food plentiful. Marion used to look on in wonder at Miss Mallaby, who seemed quite satisfied with a diminutive chop and a spoonful of rice pudding. Marion would have liked another chop and invariably finished the pudding; but then Miss Mallaby prided herself on being what she styled "a genteel feeder" and ate her chop in minute mouthfuls and her rice grain by grain like the ghoul in the Arabian Nights. Moreover she had the larder keys. Marion bore it well. She supplemented the spare diet with bread and cheese brought in her pocket from home and eaten in her room at night, a proceed-

ing that, as Mrs. Topham and Miss Mallaby always afterwards declared, brought mice to their as yet mouseless household. She read to the old lady until her voice was hoarse and wearied her eyes over fine stitching; but the fact remained, Mrs. Topham did not like Marion, and Marion detested Mrs. Topham.

"I suppose," old Mrs. Topham said one day, "that with all your reading you cannot tell me the name of the king who never smiled again?"

"Why, Henry the First, grandmama," said Marion smiling.

"Not at all," said the old lady. "It was William the Second."

The discussion was keen. In the end Marion brought from home a Magnall's Questions to prove her right.

"You see," she said triumphantly, "it was Henry."

"I see," said the old lady grimly, "but it might just as well have been William if I said so. And as I won't be contradicted in my own house, you may go, miss!"

And Marion had gone just two days before her uncle's treat.

Perhaps it was the feeling she was in disgrace, for though James Oliver had taken her part, her mother had scolded her soundly, that gave to Marion's bearing that mingling of hauteur and defiance with which she advanced to receive old Lady Metcalfe's recognition.

"There's beauty there, James Oliver," the old lady said to the doctor, when Marion had been dismissed. "There's beauty and spirit and temper. Mind what you do with her."

After the tea there were games and as old Lady Metcalfe and the two Mrs. Tophams sat together on a

form and watched the fun, the former exclaimed of Master Henry,—“ I never knew that child could shout before.”

At seven o'clock, Ellen Thorpe, who was tired, took Master Henry home to bed, bidding Mary Ann stay till the finish of the festivities if she chose. So Mary Ann remained, taking no part in the merry-making herself, but sufficiently pleased to look on at the others. There were those there in their prime that the watching girl would live to see grow old and die; slips of girls like Miss Marion and her cousin, that would soon be marrying and having children themselves; and children—it seemed to Mary Ann a pity that among his gifts, Mr. Topham could not give the children a longer span of childhood, before they must leave its even pathway for the dusty highroad of life with what steep ascents and deep declivities of human endurance and human anguish who could tell!

There was dancing before 'he close. Mr. Topham led out the old coquette of seventy, who declared that a quadrille on the grass was just what she wanted to give her appetite a fillip for dinner; whilst the lean cousin stepped a stately if somewhat broken-winded measure with the younger Mrs. Topham.

After the dance there were speeches, a panegyric from the Vicar, another from the draper, a third from the grocer, a stutter from the cousin and lastly an oration from Mr. Topham himself, which being ended and the clapping and applause dying at last, Mr. Topham walked towards the tent to seek his wife and escort her home.

A stout man, with his dress disordered and his face inflamed, broke then through the crowd and sighting Mr. Topham, lurched towards him, cuffing helplessly at his head.

"A trifle, Eleanor, a mere trifle," said Mr. Topham, entering the tent a little hastily, "a neighbour who has imbibed too freely, that is all. This has been a most successful day."

CHAPTER XII

— AND AS A MAN OF BUSINESS

"I KNEW who it was," Mary Ann said to Ellen Thorpe that evening. "It was Mr. Fali. He nearly stumbled over me, so I seed him plain. And if he hadn't been tipsy, he'd have felled the master."

To which Ellen Thorpe replied:—

"You are a good enough wench but there's summat still for you to learn. In this house it isn't always good to repeat inside what you see or hear out, so if I were you, I'd hold my tongue."

"But who was it?" Mrs. Topham asked her husband next morning.

"Haven't I told you?" Mr. Topham said irritably. "A drunken neighbour."

"But what neighbour?" persisted Mrs. Topham.

"Find out," said her husband shortly.

Mrs. Topham asked Ellen Thorpe but Ellen Thorpe did not know and was sure that Mary Ann did not.

At dinner Mrs. Topham repeated her question. The lawyer's answer was more emphatic than polite and Miss Mary had exclaimed fretfully,

"Really, mama, why should you bother?"

"I didn't mean to make him irritable," said Mrs. Topham nervously, after Mr. Topham had noisily left the room. And Ellen Thorpe, who was clearing the table, asked dryly,— "And when did anyone know a Topham that wasn't irritable?"

Ellen Thorpe had a license for plain-speaking in the

Topham household; she was a valued servant; she was something more — a distant and poor connexion of the Topham family.

"Why not take a drive this afternoon?" she said to her mistress, who between baffled curiosity and the fatigue of the treat, looked tired and depressed.

"I think I will," said Mrs. Topham.

A year ago a wealthy client of her husband's had given her a basket carriage and a piebald pony. Old Mrs. Topham had disapproved of the gift — said it would aid and abet Eleanor in getting too fat; but her daughter-in-law, who was not very fond of exercise, found her present a great convenience.

At two o'clock she started accompanied by Mary Ann and Henry. Miss Topham detested the slow progress of the piebald pony and would never drive in the basket carriage if she could avoid doing so.

"I think," said Mrs. Topham to Mary Ann on the bridge, "we'll go and see Miss Fall."

Mary Ann's heart throbbed at the sight of the familiar places; the field path she had taken that day with her father, the tall grey house upon the hill, the window of her garret bedroom showing in its rim of ivy; but the pony shied at a large sale bill fastened on the gate and at another nailed to a beech tree half way up the drive.

Mrs. Topham looked wonderingly at Mary Ann.

"What does it mean?" she said.

And Mary Ann remembered how only the Sunday before last her mother had been telling her how she was sure all was not well at the Falls, so moody and depressed of late had been her father.

They rounded the curve in the drive and the house was before them with its closed door, that faced the round grass-plot and the sun-dial.

"I have played round that dial with Ann and George a score of times," said Mrs. Topham to Henry and Mary Ann, "and it's just the same as it used to be."

Mary Ann rang the bell and presently a lagging step came along the passage and Miss Fall opened the door herself. She was dressed with her usual precise neatness and still had the same air of quiet authority; but her tall figure seemed somehow to droop a little and her face, usually so calm, looked worn and anxious.

"Why, Shinnys," she said to Mary Ann in kindly surprise; and then her eyes went past her to Mrs. Topham, struggling to descend from the chaise. Miss Fall went swiftly to her.

"Eleanor," she exclaimed, "you have brought good news?" And great tears rose to her eyes and rolled slowly down her cheeks.

"News?" repeated Mrs. Topham, her comely face all perturbed and anxious. "I don't think I understand."

Mary Ann led the pony round to the stable and Henry followed her.

Miss Fall and Mrs. Topham entered the house. In the hall the furniture had been pushed into a corner; the steel fender and fire-dogs had gone from the hearth; the sheepskin mats from the floor; above the mantelpiece the head of a former farmer Fall's prize ram gazed blankly down. In Miss Fall's own parlour there was the same air of desolation, of threatened change. The books were gone from the shelves; the carpet was rolled up and propped against the wall; the chimneypiece was bare of ornaments; where pictures had been there were rims upon the papered walls; the bureau drawers were open showing emptiness; their contents lay upon the table and it was evident Miss Fall had been busy sorting them.

Mrs. Topham gazed round her in shocked bewilderment.

"Ann," she said at last, "what does it all mean?"

"We are going to be sold up," Miss Fall said quietly; but strong woman that she was, almost repellent in her self-sufficiency, her strength left her then and she sat down feebly.

"Sold up?" echoed Mrs. Topham, "but who would dare to sell you up?"

"Why, your husband," said Miss Fall dryly. "John Topham."

"My husband?"

"You didn't know?" said Miss Fall incredulously.

Mrs. Topham shook her head speechlessly and then, moaning, covered her face with both her hands.

Miss Fall sat by and let her cry. There was more in those tears of Mrs. Topham's than even Miss Fall knew of, not grief only for her wrecked home but a woman's heart to the last faithful, to the last submissive.

"How?" said Mrs. Topham at last.

"The mortgage poor father raised principally," replied Miss Fall. "When Aunt Louisa died she left us enough to have paid it off and I begged George to do so but he wouldn't. He bought," she continued with an ironical laugh, "prize cattle instead. There might have been a curse on them, they did so badly. And after that what with bad seasons and wages getting higher and one thing and another, George began to borrow money."

"From whom?" asked Mrs. Topham.

"From your husband," was the dispassionate answer. "George tells me he promised not to press him and he didn't until this last year or two. We sold as much as we dared sell to pay off some of the debt but

it was no use. And this," she looked round the dismantled room with tearless eyes,—“this is the end.”

Mrs. Topham was sobbing bitterly again.

“Oh, John,” she kept saying, as if the lawyer were really there. “Oh, John!”

“You don’t know,” Miss Fall went on, “how fond I am of this old house. My mother came here a young bride. It was a love-match. She was above him in life as you know—and she knew nothing of farm-houses and their ways. She has often told me how, when she peeped out at it over father’s shoulder, she turned quite cold with fright. But she made up her mind to do and you know, Eleanor what a manager she was. She had spent all her young life in a school, poor thing, and didn’t know what a home was, she used to tell us children, till my father brought her here. She was fond of it and I am fond of it. I close my eyes and the house is full of her. Maybe I have clung to it too much—I could never bear the thought of a wife for George lest I should be turned out—and now—”

She rocked herself to and fro.

“I think when they lock its doors upon me, my heart will break.”

She looked anxiously at Mrs. Topham’s face.

“It seems so hard,” she said as if she were pleading.

Mrs. Topham shook her head.

“Hard,” she said, “yes,—and I can do nothing.”

She rose presently, drying her eyes.

“You will stay to tea, Eleanor,” said Miss Fall.

“My brother’s out.”

Mrs. Topham shook her head.

“It may be the last you will have with me,” said Miss Fall.

And Mrs. Topham sat down again; but it was a

sorry meal and only Henry, who gorged himself on plum jam, enjoyed it.

The drive home was more silent than the silent tea. Master Henry went to sleep on his mother's lap, his straw hat pressed against her shoulder; and Mary Ann guided the pony, who made his own pace.

Mrs. Topham was thinking of many things but mostly of Ann Fall and her own married life; and recollection followed the thought that this day twenty-three years ago had been her wedding-day.

On her side the marriage with John Topham had been for love purely; on his for love and gain, gain both of a pecuniary and social sort, for Mrs. Topham, as the daughter of a country squire, had ranked higher than the prosperous but self-made solicitor.

But if Mrs. Topham had married for love, she had not married with her eyes shut. She had learnt enough of the Topham family before her wedding to know that its ruling passion was gain. In those days she had almost detested old Mrs. Topham for her mean and miserly ways; but she had not doubted with the boundless and pathetic faith of youth that John, once her husband, it would be easy to wean him from his old influences.

Like most women, who marry to reform, Mrs. Topham found the task too hard for her. Arrayed against her were, not only old Mrs. Topham's influence, which emanated from an authority that only poor Sarah had ever dared to gainsay,— but the qualities of the man himself. And so hopeless had been the struggle, so diverse their natures, that the link of their married life was almost at snapping point, when their eldest child had died. It was then, with Death as it were punctuating the futility of life, that Mrs. Topham had relinquished the struggle. She and her husband were

tacitly reconciled; and thenceforth she accepted him as he was.

It had not been easy going even then. The woman's more generous nature chafed often against its bonds; there had been even incidents to embitter and appall, like this of the Falls,—when the ruling passion swept even friendship itself ruthlessly aside; there had been rebellion loyally quelled.

Ellen Thorpe, who had lived with them since their marriage, used to tell Mary Ann that if there were saints, her mistress was one,—though no one could imagine Mrs. Topham's plump face surrounded by an aureole.

When Mrs. Topham entered the dining-room, her daughter was sitting at work in the window; and Mr. Topham, comfortably ensconced in the arm-chair, was reading the paper.

Miss Topham was making a flannel nightdress, a long and narrow garment, that must have been a source of endless discomfort to the hapless wearer; but Miss Topham boasted, that she never wasted time and the making of skimpy garments for the poor was one of her means of employing it.

She looked up as her mother entered and, in spite of Mrs. Topham's signals, exclaimed at once upon the poor lady's mournful appearance.

Mr. Topham dropped his paper.

"You have been crying," he said. "What's the matter?"

"I have been to see Ann Fall," said Mrs. Topham.

"If there is a woman I detest it is that Miss Fall," remarked Miss Topham.

"You hold your tongue, miss," said her father roughly. "Well," he added to his wife, "and you have been to the Falls'?"

"Oh, John," said Mrs. Topham, "is it really necessary to go to extremes with them like this — such old friends both to you and me?"

"Sentiment, sentiment, sentiment," said the lawyer testily. "Can't you trust me, Eleanor, to do what is right?"

"No, not always," confessed Mrs. Topham very truthfully. "There are times when you put money first and go too far, John."

"What is it about the Falls?" asked Miss Topham curiously.

"It's this," said her father. "The Falls have owed my father, and then me, money for years. I have tried all ways to get it and I can't, and now I am going to try the one unfailing way. Of course your mother objects to it."

"You are so silly, mama," said Miss Topham.

"Perhaps I am, Polly," said Mrs. Topham, sitting down with the air of one unable to support the contest standing. "But I know and feel that if your father will only listen to me, he will some day be thankful."

"And why?" asked her husband with an air of interest.

"Because," said Mrs. Topham boldly but trembling, "it's money ill got and no blessing can rest upon it. Instead of ruining the Falls we should lend them a helping hand. Ann says these bad times —"

Mr. Topham interrupted her.

"Oh, I know all that Miss Fall has to say. But you go to George Fall. Ask him how much money he spends in public houses and stews? Money ill got, indeed! Money ill spent is more like it. When people lend money, it stands to reason there will come a day when they want it paid back. That day has come to me. So there's an end to it, Eleanor."

"Such a step will never bring a blessing," said Mrs. Topham.

"It will bring me the money and that's what I want," retorted Mr. Topham.

Miss Topham appreciated her parent's wisdom and smiled; poor Mrs. Topham shuddered.

"Besides," said Mr. Topham, "I want the farm."

"You want the farm?" echoed his wife.

"I want the farm," repeated Mr. Topham mysteriously; "more, I am not going to tell you at present. Come, Mrs. Topham, don't look so woe-begone — what day is this?"

"Our wedding-day," said Mrs. Topham. "I was thinking of it as I came along."

"Twenty-three years ago," the lawyer said genially. "One wouldn't think it to look at her — eh, Miss Mary?"

"I don't know," said Miss Topham critically.

Mr. Topham went out and returned with a parcel.

"Come, open that," he said to his wife, "and don't say I am such a bad husband to you after all."

Miss Topham came forward to assist with the strings and helped her mother to unfold a dress-length of handsome silk.

"Well?" said the lawyer.

"You are very good to me, John," his wife said with a little quaver of her voice.

"I am going to the office now, so I shall leave you two to discuss fashions — not the Falls, mind," said Mr. Topham as he left the room.

"He thinks it makes up, poor fellow," said Mrs. Topham. "But, oh, it doesn't, it doesn't."

"It's beautiful silk," said Miss Mary, testing it between her finger and thumb. "I should put it away if I were you, mama."

"Yes, I shall put it away," said Mrs. Topham, with a note of passion in her voice that made her daughter stare at her dumbfounded, "for I will never wear it as long as I live!"

When the Sale Day at the Howe came both Mrs. Topham and Miss Mary were there. Miss Topham delighted in sales; the auctioneer's jokes convulsed her with mirth; to explore a house to its inmost recesses and criticise what had such a short time ago been someone's treasured possession gave her the keenest enjoyment.

Mrs. Topham made many purchases; some were articles she had remembered, a bed she had slept in on the night of a dance and a wardrobe and toilet table from the same room. But out of her own purse she bought also some things that later Miss Fall received from an unknown giver,—her mother's chair, a china tea-set, some pictures and the ram's head, that had been old George's pride.

It was all over at last. Strange men were packing the things on the lawn; the garden paths were littered with papers and untidiness of all sorts; strange feet hurried through the empty rooms. As Mrs. Topham and Miss Mary drove away in the chaise, the curtainless, blindless windows looked blankly after them, as if the house missed and mourned the human presences that an unkindly Fate had banished from their old home.

CHAPTER XIII

THE MISSES LIGHTFOOT

It was on Christmas Day that year of the Howe Sale, that old Mrs. Topham, having dined with her son very heartily, considering her age, on turkey and plum-pudding, began to examine Henry in arithmetic.

"Two and two make how much?" enquired old Mrs. Topham.

"Three," said Henry, who was munching almonds and raisins.

His grandmother held up her skinny hands in horror.

"Dear me, Eleanor," she said to her daughter-in-law, "who teaches this child?"

"Mama's supposed to," rather maliciously replied Miss Mary.

"Don't be so pert, miss," said old Mrs. Topham, greatly to the satisfaction of Ellen Thorpe, who had just entered with Mary Ann for their glasses of wine. On Christmas Day Mr. Topham added a plate of oranges and apples with the smallest of the figs and a few raisins.

"He should go to school," said the old lady, when the servants had left the room. "I don't believe in boys being kept at home tied to their mother's apron strings. A term or two with those Lightfoot women would be better than nothing unless you send him to a boarding-school."

"Not boarding-school," said young Mrs. Topham, instinctively drawing Henry to her.

"The Lightfoot women," as old Mrs. Topham con-

temptuously called them, were two sisters, known respectively as Miss Maria and Miss Susan.

Their father had been a former vicar of Burnthorpe; but as he chose to give his three sons a college education and afterwards established them in their separate professions, when he died all that remained for his daughters was an annuity of twenty pounds apiece and the furniture.

The brothers by the time of their father's death were all married and had got, as they did not fail to remind their sisters, other ties; accordingly the Misses Lightfoot had found themselves compelled to make their unaided best of a bad situation. They took a small house, the smallest of a terrace of small houses relegated almost entirely to spinsters like themselves, with a couple of widows and one old bachelor,—and they started a school on a very limited stock of erudition with all kinds of dog-eared primers and dull old-fashioned school books to supplement their deficiencies. Whilst their mourning had been still fresh, and public sympathy not staled and the idea a novelty, they had done very well. But that was eighteen years ago and in eighteen years Burnthorpe had almost forgotten its old Vicar in its interest and criticism of the new; and their sympathy for his daughters, as sympathy like spirits of wine and ammonia never fail to do, had gradually evaporated.

The school also had dwindled; and this Christmas Day, when old Mrs. Topham was tormenting Henry with arithmetic, when he was already heavy with mince-pie, the Misses Lightfoot were dining upon sausages and tea before a very small fire in their dull little dining-room, and seriously discussing their financial situation.

They were both by this time, as you may imagine,

very elderly women. Miss Lightfoot,—Maria,— was the gentler spirit of the two and about her faded fairness of hair and skin, there still lingered some faint remembrance of her former prettiness that Miss Susan entirely lacked. Miss Susan was short and, considering the predominating spareness of her diet, astonishingly stout; and her hair, she always protested, had seemed to grow redder as she grew older; or was it that, so illimitable is credulity when we're young, she had in the heyday of her youth believed it auburn? Also Miss Susan wore spectacles; had red-rimmed eyes; a dyspeptic nose, and — is it to be wondered at? — a temper.

So far the Misses Lightfoot, despite the many fluctuations in the fortunes of their school, had always been able to keep a servant; and however unsatisfactory this possession in its successive courses had proved to be, in spite of the bread and butter she consumed, her reckless way of burning coal and wasting soap and candles, her maintenance had seemed to the unfortunate gentlewomen less an addition to their comfort than a necessary testimony to the fact (which they never forgot) that once, eighteen years ago, they, notwithstanding their ready-made costumes and self-effacement, had been the Misses Lightfoot of Burnthorpe Vicarage.

But this Christmas Day the time had come for a tragic choice to be made, either the Possession must be discarded or the grocer's children accepted as pupils. Now although the Misses Lightfoot were religiously satisfied that so far as flesh and blood goes, there is little to choose between one individual and another, and that the last may eventually be first and so forth, it was a precept they aired only on Sundays, when they might be said to take it out of their drawers with their morocco prayer-books and their clean handkerchiefs

and return with the prayer-books, minus the handkerchiefs, on the Sunday night, before they said their prayers, folded away their best frocks, and did up their hair in tissue paper.

In short, throughout their long struggle, they had firmly shut the doors of their Academy against pupils of a class, that in their own palmy days at the Vicarage, had been contented with the village school; indeed it was only with starvation staring them in the face, that they had consented to receive the offspring of the smaller farmers; and their reluctant admission of the draper's family had only been sweetened by the subsequent prosperity of the draper, who had partially retired and lived now in a pretty house outside the town; whilst his two daughters, whose warty fingers Miss Maria had tenderly guided amid the mazes of pot-hooks and round "o's," were finishing their education at a fashionable seminary at Markington. But in the progeny of a man, who wore a white apron and reeked of soap and candles, necessity had offered them indeed a bitter pill.

"They are very well-behaved little girls," said Miss Maria timidly, eating her sausages with no appetite and thinking not without some self-reproach of the present of Yule candles and the bag of frumenty that had come on Christmas Eve with the grocer's compliments.

Miss Susan corrected her.

"In their proper place," she said.

That they couldn't and never would sound their aitches, Miss Susan was certain; and what a shocking example to the other children, if there should be other children, which at this junction of the holidays was generally somewhat problematical.—and what a trial to themselves. So far the Misses Lightfoot had not associated with people who didn't sound their aitches

and certainly they had not ministered education unto them; and Miss Maria proceeded to relate, how she had gone one day to the shop and the grocer had said,—“Am, miss?” and she had said “Am!” quite innocently, not knowing in the least what he meant.

“They might even have heads,—things in them, I mean,” said Miss Susan grimly.

And Miss Maria put her hands protectingly to her fair hair, which she wore in elaborate plaits, and murmured plaintively,—

“And their parents and the other parents might object to paraffin!”

“Horrible!” exclaimed Miss Susan.

“Fortunately,” said Miss Maria soothingly, “we have not to decide just at once.”

It is said that when Fortune seems to frown her worst, then is the moment when if only we knew it, she has ready for us her very blindest smiles. And so it proved with the Misses Lightfoot.

The very day that Henry's fate was decided for him by a simple sum in addition, Dr. and Mrs. Oliver had also resolved to send their younger Olive Branches to the Misses Lightfoot's Academy. Marion had left home in November. Old Lady Metcalfe had not forgotten the pretty face that had attracted her notice at Mr. Topham's treat and had recommended her as companion to an elderly friend of her own. So Marion had gone and, according to the report spread in Burnthorpe by her gratified mother, was living in clover,—clover, it must be said, not of the ordinary pastoral and vulgar sort but of that metaphorical species specially associated with the aristocracy and high living.

But to return to the Misses Lightfoot. The octave of Christmas had not expired, the vexed question of servant versus grocer was not settled, when Mrs. Top-

ham and Mrs. Oliver called together to make preliminary enquiries. Mrs. Topham took Henry with her, who completely won by a sweet biscuit offered with one of Miss Maria's most engaging smiles, declared he would like to marry her, which made Miss Maria blush very much and offer him more biscuits, at which Miss Susan frowned warningly — for the supply of biscuits was limited and specially reserved for these occasions.

That same evening a letter was despatched to the grocer (Miss Susan wrote the first, which, Miss Maria considering it too autocratic, secretly destroyed), politely informing him that his little girls were not eligible, *et cetera, et cetera*.

The day of Henry's advent was a fortunate one for the Misses Lightfoot. Mrs. Topham had seen more than the poor ladies ever supposed could be seen; and Henry rarely came on a Monday morning empty-handed. Sometimes it was dainty pudding to tempt Miss Maria's appetite, or a jar of chicken jelly, or one of Mrs. Topham's famous rabbit pies.

No wonder that Miss Susan, grim to all other children, unbent and favoured Henry, whilst Miss Maria called him pet names and made learning so easy, the youngster hardly learned at all.

One day Henry spilt the ink. The punishment for spilling ink was four raps with the cane, for Miss Susan clung to that now rapidly vanishing weapon of authority, which wielded by her was never without effect, though lightly waved in Miss Maria's little hand, the spectacle was too pathetic for laughter.

Henry spilt the ink. Miss Maria found the tell-tale stain first and questioned him.

"Yes," said Henry.

With a troubled face Miss Maria sought her sister.

Miss Susan was in the kitchen, basting a small leg of pork that Mrs. Topham had sent and which could not be trusted to the Possession.

Should they cane him? Certainly they caned the little Olivers but then the doctor, in that direction, had given them *carte blanche*, the cane in his opinion being a wholesome corrective.

But Henry, Mrs. Topham's darling,—this was another matter. Perhaps Mrs. Topham would object? She might even remove him? Once in the beginning of their career but when their first success had rendered them proof against such incidents, an enraged parent had removed a child because Miss Susan had slapped—not caned—but only, Miss Susan always affirmed, “*gently* slapped it.” And if Mrs. Topham should remove Henry, no more tasty additions to their meagre suppers, no more pleasant afternoons in Mrs. Topham's drawing-room, nor of those little helps and attentions that had done so much to sweeten and relieve the monotony of their dull lives.

Miss Susan left her sister to baste the pork and entered the school-room.

“Are you sure,” she said to Henry, “that no one pushed you?”

And then, either from suggestion or fright, for Henry had seen Miss Susan wield the cane, or mischief, Henry blurted out,—“Cousin Tom” had pushed him. Cousin Tom was reprov'd, not caned; Master Henry cautioned; and Miss Susan returned to the kitchen, congratulating herself that she had mastered a difficult situation in a way her less subtle sister would never have imagined.

But Henry paid.

Very soon the little Olivers began to complain at home that their cousin was a favourite, that he might

be as naughty as he liked but was never punished, that the punishments were all theirs, principally Tom's. Mrs. Oliver shook her head over their tales in meek futility. After all it was only on a par, she said, with everything else connected with them and the Tophams. Her children got nothing, Eleanor's all. She couldn't send the Misses Lightfoot bribes as Eleanor did; nor could their father at present afford to remove them to another school. Therefore they must manage things as best they could and in their own way.

The young Olivers did manage things in their own way. In school hours, beneath the eyes of Miss Susan and her sister, they treated their cousin with a politeness that to any minds less suspicious might have seemed at least doubtful; in play-time they sent him to Coventry. Tom, who was a bit of a bully, teased him constantly and Henry, though game enough for his age, was sufficiently afraid of Tom not to tell.

The only one of his cousins who showed him any kindness, was Annie, a pretty little girl but dull at learning, whose fat fingers suffered much from Miss Susan's impatient taps. When the others were merry at their romps, she would slip from them and join Henry in his lonely corner. There they would play quietly under the only tree in the Misses Lightfoot's garden, a gnarled and blighted crab. Their only quarrel was once when Henry, fired by Miss Maria's historical readings, insisted on playing Jane Grey with Annie's wooden doll and sawed off its head with a pocket knife. The head wouldn't stick on again and Annie, who had watched the execution with fearful interest, wept bitterly. The next day Henry brought her a new doll and, under the crab tree which was then in full leaf, they made it up and kissed one another to the great derision of Tom, who mocked them loudly.

Henry remained at the Misses Lightfoot's a year. At the end of which year his father, examining him again in arithmetic and finding him not much further advanced than he had been at the beginning of this chapter, insisted on sending him to a boarding-school at York. But the glamour of his presence remained over the Misses Lightfoot's Academy for many terms, and the neighbouring farmers were proud to send their progeny where one of Lawyer Topham's sons had been.

CHAPTER XIV

MOTHERING SUNDAY

"You see now, my dear, why I bought the Howe Farm. I shall put William there with Wintersgill as head. Apparently farming's what he is most fitted for. Henry must be the lawyer."

Thus Mr. Topham to Mrs. Topham, as he brushed his hair and adjusted his collar and tie before the looking-glass in their bedroom.

Mrs. Topham, still in bed with a red wadded jacket over her broad shoulders, held a letter from Henry in her hand. It was very short but it was Henry's own composition. He sent his love and wanted some tarts. The rest of the sheet was scrawled with crosses. His mother kissed them surreptitiously as she listened to her husband.

"Yes, the Howe Farm shall be William's. This failure to pass his examination has been a great disappointment to me. But we must make the best of our disappointment —" the last syllable was lost in a facial contortion caused by a refractory stud.

Mr. Topham finished his toilet and looked out of the window.

"The garden looks different from what it did three years back," he said, coming to his wife's bedside. "What has Henry to say?"

Mrs. Topham handed him the letter timidly. Mr. Topham glanced it through and threw it aside with an impatient "Pshaw! that lad thinks of nothing but

"He's such a little fellow, John," said Mrs. Top-

ham, whose heart was still sore for the loss of her nursling.

Mr. Topham left the room without answering and Mrs. Topham rang the bell. It was Mary Ann who answered the summons, grown taller since we saw her last and more womanly withal. It was her daily task to assist her mistress to dress; and Mrs. Topham, it must be owned, preferred her smiling services to those of her daughter, who was not always very willing.

The New Year had brought William Topham home plucked in more senses than one. London had been too much for the country youth, who had come home with both health and reputation not a little the worse for his dissipations in town. When the young ladies of Burnthorpe used to flutter up to Mr. Topham and enquire so anxiously, pretty dears, how was Mr. William, the lawyer used to enjoy the joke and smile back grimly into their innocent faces.

But William was out of spirits, as well as out of health. He accepted the idea of the Howe with resignation but no enthusiasm. His mother thought it a prodigal's repentance and endeavoured to sweeten the husks, as she did his porridge, lavishly. William unbent a little to her kindness, was gentle and more courteous than he had ever been, and one day, when as if by accident Mrs. Topham mentioned Marion, he became quite affectionate. Marion was still away. She had grown prettier than ever, Mrs. Topham told William; and showed him a photograph that his Aunt Sarah had given her. Later the same photograph was lost from Mrs. Topham's album and found a resting-place in William's coat pocket. William confessed to his mother, that if his father had been more lenient to him and to Marion, he would never have gone so deep into the mire. He would have worked better too, he

said. In short, as his mother quickly discovered, the child-love had grown to a passion like a gorgeous poppy flower amid a patch of worthless oats.

Mrs. Topham was sympathetic. She talked to him of Marion as much as he would. She grew bold even and suggested that perhaps if he tried now to please his father and fall in with his plans, in time Mr. Topham might relent and—Marion would be home for Easter.

So far Mary Ann's parents had stayed as caretakers in the Howe. They now removed to their cottage and the house was prepared for William. There were many gaps and bare walls, but "William might mend that," the lawyer said jocosely, "when he brought a wife home."

Miss Mary went with her brother to act as housekeeper; and there was some consultation as to whether Mary Ann or Ellen Thorpe should accompany her as maid. In the end the lot, much to Mary Ann's regret, fell upon Ellen; Mrs. Topham wisely concluding that where a woman is comely the flesh is weak.

Mrs. Topham accepted her new position with great aplomb. She reproved Ellen for addressing her as Miss Mary and decreed that her title was to be "mam" henceforth. Indeed had not William been a special favourite of her own, Ellen Thorpe's stay might have been short, for Miss Mary's airs and graces were distinctly aggressive. Mrs. Topham's first visit to the Howe after William's installation was almost a breach between herself and Mary. Hardly had the good lady settled herself in an arm-chair over the parlour fire, than Miss Topham appeared jingling a bunch of keys and stated with acrimonious emphasis that if her mother had come to spy she was at liberty to do so.

"Mary, what do you think me?" was Mrs. Top-

ham's pained rejoinder; and Miss Topham had the grace to hang her head.

Of his three children Mary was the father's favourite. She was the most like him in personal appearance; she was shrewd too and saving; and her business capacity, the lawyer proudly used to say, was wonderful. But Miss Topham, bristling in her new freedom was a surprise not altogether pleasant even to her father. They came to a collision at an early stage. Once a week Mr. Topham visited the Howe to pay wages and supervise matters generally. For housekeeping, Miss Topham had a weekly allowance, out of which, by dint of much saving and stinting, which fell heavily on Ellen Thorpe and the farm lads, she had contrived to hoard by the end of the month quite a respectable sum. This, in spite of Miss Topham's protestations, tears and lastly sulkiness, her father pocketed; and though later he yielded to his wife's representation that for Mary to keep it might act as an encouragement, the struggle left its bitterness with Miss Topham, who was slow to forget. Mr. Topham became in her parlance "the old man," "the governor." She resisted his inspectory visits and she urged William, more than ever given to phlegm and melancholy, to resent them too.

William, weak and suffering not a little from his father's too evident contempt of him, listened readily. To her father personally it suited Miss Topham to appear dutiful as usual; but William was moody and restive though without courage for open rebellion. Mrs. Topham saw the widening breach between father and son, guessed the cause and was diligent in one counsel. "Be patient, John, William would be better married."

Lent of that year began in March and on Mothering Sunday, Mary Ann went home. This fortnightly visit

made her only outing; and she always rose early, that she might be off betimes and spend as long a day as possible. She walked alone for she had, although a lonely lass enough, no sweethearts. The butcher's boy and the grocer's boy had each solicited the honour, to say nothing of other sheepish lads who had, from time to time, waylaid her in Mr. Topham's entry. But Mary Ann would none of them; freckled youth that was given to suddenly snatching one by the waist and kissing or tickling as inclined had no charms for her; nor did she approve the other serving damisels of the place, who vainly made her overtures of friendship coming out of church. Perhaps her mother's influence, perhaps Ellen Thorpe's authority, perhaps such close and constant contact with her mistress had all tended to structure the girl's behaviour with a sedateness beyond her years. At any rate on that Spring morning, Mary Ann walked soberly alone.

The season was unusually mild, milder and more advanced than it had been before within Mary Ann's remembrance; though older folk could put their fingers to similar Springs in such and such a year long ago; and every now and then she turned aside to gather the white violets that were scenting the hedgerows.

That Sunday was often afterwards in Mary Ann's beside-musing. The bell for Sunday-school was tolling as she passed up the village street and took the familiar turning to the cottage. The scarlet Japonica, that covered its grey walls, was fully out; and on the wooden bench beside the open door, where poor Jane had spent so many hours in mute communing on the mysteries of death, her mother sat awaiting her.

She came hobbling to the gate, for rheumatism had taken greater hold of her, and held it open.

"Father's siding the breakfast things," she said.
"You sit down beside me."

They sat down together and Mary Ann took one of the hard-worked hands between her own and stroked it gently as he told her news, only once interrupting herself to exclaim, as she slipped the wedding ring along her mother's finger,—

"Why, mother, you be getting rare and thin."

Her father joined them presently, his black coat hanging baggily above his shapeless trousers, and brushing the beaver hat that would last him all his life gently with his handkerchief. He was bound for Chapel but paused on his way to ask, almost reverently, how Mr. Topham was.

Probably it was not from such as old Tom Wintersgill, that Mr. Topham valued esteem; but even he might have been gratified had he known how in that humble house he was set upon a pedestal and worshipped. Who but he had chosen old Wintersgill as hind? Who but he, when George was seized with the emigration fever, had furnished the youth with fare and outfit for Canada? Who but he — but there, as the old man listened to Mary Ann's report, he held his hat in his hand.

There had been changes in the family since Mary Ann had been with the Tophams. Jane's funeral card in a black frame had another beside it; for Jerry had fallen from a hay-rick and been killed, and though his death had made less impression on Mary Ann than Jane's, his mother had aged since the blow.

Jerry had been married before he died to one of Miss Fall's servants, a sturdy darsel with red hair and a temper.

"He called it sperrit, poor feller," old Wintersgill had said to his wife that very morning. "Thee had sperrit too, lass, but of a better sort."

Mrs. Jerry came to tea. She was employed at the mill at the Howe — again a proof of Mr. Topham's benevolence,—and had many tales to relate of Ellen Thorpe's particular ways and Miss Topham's mean ones. Mary Ann laughed but her mother sat silent and her father looked abashed. He could bear no mud thrown at the Tophams; though even he had not entirely escaped the sharpness of Miss Topham's tongue.

"In my time," he said doubtfully, "we dursn't have talked so of our betters."

"Then I wouldn't give a fig for your time," perty said Mrs. Jerry, tossing her head.

After tea, the widow betook herself to church. She was keeping company again, Mrs. Wintersgill whispered to Mary Ann, and added with a touch of fierceness,

"It's the mothers that remember — not the wives!"

They were relieved when she was gone and they could sit quietly until the church bells had finished chiming and the room was dim with twilight. Mary Ann took the lamp then and lifted from its place on the dresser the big Bible. She opened it at the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes and they read it verse by verse — Mary Ann glibly in the expressionless sing-song of the National school; the old man with something of the unctuous gravity he had acquired at Chapel and with speech so purged of Yorkshire breadth that from his lips the words fell meaningless; whilst she, who alone of that little company could have given to those grand sentences all their significance and force, had to be content to spell them out word for word like a little child.

And as they read of the pitcher to be broken at the fountain, of the darkened windows and the mourners going about the streets, the old man stretched out his hand to his wife.

"That strikes you and me, miss: s," he said, "to the very marrow."

After the chapter it was time for Mary Ann to go. A few years later she often boasted to the girls she trained that never was she behind her time in returning from the day's outing. But in truth she had little chance, since both father and mother reluctantly but firmly never failed to urge her away. That night they stood together at the porch and watched her down the path: and at the gate. Mary Ann, moved by a sudden impulse, ran back and kissed them both. She has told me since that all the following week she could not get the twelfth chapter of Ecclesiastes and her mother's face out of her mind.

On the Saturday afternoon Miss Mary came to visit her mother. Mary Ann was sent out for muffins and when she came back Miss Mary was awaiting her in the kitchen.

"Mama wants to speak to you," she said.

Mary Ann went into the dining-room. Her cheeks were flushed with running but when she saw her sister-in-law standing there and the look in Mrs. Topham's eyes, the colour died instantly.

Mrs. Topham took both the girl's hands in hers.

"I know," said Mary Ann, "it's mother." And Jerry's widow blurted with a sob, "She's dead, Mary Ann, all of a sudden-like. This afternoon at two o'clock."

"I must go home," said Mary Ann, and said it over and over again.

"Yes, yes," said Mrs. Topham, "you shall go home, poor child. I'll send to the Bull for a trap."

"Mama, what extravagance!" exclaimed Miss Mary, who had come into the room.

"I would rather walk, if you please, mam," said Mary Ann, "it would do me good to walk."

And in the end she had her way. Her sister-in-law could not tell her much only that her father, feeling suddenly that something was amiss at home, had left his work and returned to the cottage and so found her,—dead in her chair. She shivered and cried so as she told it, that Mary Ann forbore to question her.

They reached the village at last. Curious eyes looked at them through the windows; children watched them from a distance in the street.

The four blinds of the little cottage were drawn down; the door was shut. In the kitchen a woman was fussing about, opening drawers and seeking things she didn't know where to find. Old Wintersgill sat in a corner of the settle, his head bowed in his hands.

He looked up in a dazed way at his daughter and said in a terrible voice:

"She is upstairs."

So Mary Ann went upstairs, the creaking wooden stairs. The door was closed. She raised the latch.

The next minute she was looking at her mother's face, crying aloud in her anguish that it was not her mother's face, so unlike was it in its awful solemnity to the homely features she had known and loved and would never — on this earth — see again.

CHAPTER XV.

MARION

MARION OLIVER returned for the Easter holidays.

As the rain was falling heavily, there were no young Olivers at the station to meet her, and the only other occupant of the Burnthorpe bus happened to be her Uncle John. Mr. Topham took no notice of his niece beyond a curt "How d'ye do?" and appeared absorbed in his newspaper, which he read assiduously until they stopped at his own entrance.

Marion gave a sigh of relief when the great iron gates, with their bronze griffins mounting guard upon the stone pillars, closed upon him and they were rattling across the Market Square to her own home. The little town with its slate roofs glistening in the rain, its streaming windows, the pools of water in the deserted Market Place, seemed to the watching girl, after her year's absence, to have grown unaccountably paltry and insignificant; and yet — and this was their association ever afterwards in her remembrance — how quiet, how full of quiet and repose.

The front door, looking much narrower than it used to do and specially so perhaps after sudden contrast with Mr. Topham's lordly portal, opened before the old bay horse had come to a standstill and shewed Mrs. Oliver's grey-robed figure and pale face against a background of clamorous children.

Mrs. Oliver ran out to open the bus door, in spite of the rain, and Marion — kissing and expostulating, hurried her back to the house. There, in the narrow pas-

age, the children, grown suddenly shy, sidled up to kiss her; and one little toddling girl (the baby she had been when Marion first left home) stroked her blue travelling dress with an admiring touch. They followed her upstairs, the boys as well as the girls, and watched her as she took off her bonnet in front of the looking-glass that was chipped in many places and had a brown haze over it disastrous to the best complexion; and they followed her down again, whispering and wondering and looking at a safe distance from the flounces of her skirt.

Tea was spread as usual on the dining-room table, plenty of bread and butter and jam and, in Marion's honour, a dish of sausages.

Her mother came from her place behind the urn and kissed her again.

"You have grown so," she said with fond pride, "and you are so much improved."

"You haven't seen the new baby," said Tom; and Marion, turning, saw a clothes basket on the hearth-rug and Annie sitting on a hassock beside it, watching curiously. It was a sickly little thing with a white face and a quantity of dark hair, and as Marion bent and touched the tiny crumpled fists, it began to whimper, which made the small sister bend over it and begin to cry.

"Annie is quite a nurse," said Marion. And she looked from the improvised cradle into her mother's worn face with a new sympathy in her own.

"If you like," said Tom, as Marion took her place at the table beside him, "I'll take you a walk on Sunday."

"He won't take us ever," exclaimed a small sister fretfully.

"Yes, I do," said Tom.

"But you make us walk behind you," said Annie gravely.

"And why do you want to take me?" asked Marion laughing.

"You is so pretty," said the youngest but one; and Tom, reddening, could find no answer.

Marion laughed again and as she laughed her father came in.

He kissed her affectionately, but Marion noticed on his face the same look of stress and worry that had robbed Mrs. Oliver's of all its bloom. It was after tea, when the children had dispersed, and mother and daughter were alone in the nursery, that Mrs. Oliver, as she gave the last baby its bath and supper, began to lay bare the family grievances.

Marion listened quietly. It was the old story that she had heard so often but seeming somehow to-night more sordid and piteous than it had ever done before; of the too many children and too little money, of people who ran big bills and wouldn't pay them and other people who could afford to pay but who never had big bills, of the cost of school and of food and of clothing; indeed of all the hard hopeless fight to make two ends meet that never would meet and yet maintain that bane of middle-class life — an appearance.

"The money just seems to go as if you threw it down a well," ended Mrs. Oliver disconsolately; and Marion's hands began to move restlessly in her lap.

"My God," she said in her heart, "let me never be poor."

"There's Tom," continued Mrs. Oliver. "He goes to the Grammar School now and if he only works and takes a scholarship like the other boys — all will be well. The little girls ought to go away, but your father says he can't afford it — so they must go on with the Misses Lightfoot. They do their best, I know, but you

know them, Marion, it is not much of an education that they can really give."

Marion nodded. She was even more familiar with the educational deficiencies of Miss Maria and Miss Susan than her mother.

"They all want new Sunday hats, too," continued Mrs. Oliver, wandering at random as her manner was from one difficulty to another, "and I'm sure I don't know where the money's to come from."

"I'll see to that, mama," said Marion, and coming to the hearth-rug, knelt down upon it. The baby, happy after its bath, sprawled and kicked and Mrs. Oliver caught its naked feet and kissed them.

"If only mother would be reconciled," she said, in the midst of a rapturous "Bo-peep," "and leave me my share in the Will, all would be right, Marion."

"So she will," said Marion.

"So your Aunt Eleanor says," said Mrs. Oliver, "but I don't know. I sometimes think that for all the mother I have had, she might have died when I was married."

"I don't know," said Marion meditatively. "She sent me a guinea at Christmas, you know. I was surprised."

The baby fell asleep and Marion began to talk in her turn.

She described her new home, the old Norfolk manor house, the mullioned windows, the carved stone balcony, the green terraces sloping to a lake, that was white and gold in summer with water lilies, the Dutch garden, the rose garden, the Italian garden.

"It must be a lovely place," sighed Mrs. Oliver.

Marion quizzed her mistress, her false hair, her eccentricities, her jewellery and old lace. She sketched

a dinner party that had taken place the evening before she left.—the guests, their clothes, the coffee and scandal of the drawing-room. Marion had worn a white silk frock she and the French maid had concocted between them,—“I must put it on and shew you,” she said with girlish vanity, “really, I looked quite nice.”

Mrs. Oliver looked down into the pretty flushed face.

“And you were not shy nor frightened?”

Marion laughed heartily.

“I remember,” said Mrs. Oliver, “old Lady Metcalfe inviting your father and me to dine. Oh, dear, I didn’t like it at all. Those grand supercilious servants—it was they who made me feel so shy.”

“Poor mama,” said Marion, laughing again.

“But you don’t seem to mind,” her mother said wonderingly. “It seems to suit you.” A sudden thought came into her mind, bred of the change she saw in Marion, the ripened beauty, the new dignity and a something else—at once subtle, provocative, mastering, that she could not define. “It would be splendid if some rich man were to fall in love with you and marry you.”

Mrs. Oliver had not only read of such happenings in the novelettes, of which she was very fond and which she borrowed like Miss Topham from Miss Forbes; but her experience had an example to hand. One of the county magnates’ wives in their own neighbourhood had been, like Marion, a country doctor’s daughter.

Marion blushed and turned her face away, and at that moment Tom came noisily in. He had his preparation to do and clamoured loudly for a lamp.

The first time Mary Ann heard of Miss Oliver’s return was on Easter Sunday, as she waited at dinner. Marion had appeared at Church in another creation, apparently, of the French maid’s; and Miss Mary Top-

ham, who was spending Easter with her family, had come back from Church full of ire. Miss Topham's own toilet had been a last year's alpaca, turned, and her bonnet a black one with white strings, that might easily be changed to black in the event of her grandmother's demise, though at that moment old Mrs. Topham was sitting opposite to her heartily eating and enjoying a liberal plateful of stuffed roast veal.

"It's absurd," said Miss Topham, "a little vain nobody like Marion Oliver decking herself out in that fashion. **She looked like a dressed-up doll.**"

"I thought that she looked very nice," said her mother, whilst William, who looked paler and more melancholy than usual, eyed his sister resentfully.

"Oh, you always stick up for her, mama," retorted Miss Topham. "For my part, I think her money would be better saved or spent on her family. I am sure **Aunt Sarah's shawl is a disgrace.**"

"Marion does a great deal for her family," replied Mrs. Topham, "as much as she possibly can, I am sure."

Miss Topham bridled.

Her grandmother looked up from her plate, adjusted her false teeth with calm candour and remarked with brevity:

"Grapes sour."

"I am sure they are not," Miss Topham declared indignantly, "only I don't waste money on clothes —"

"It might be better for you if you did," replied old Mrs. Topham unexpectedly, and not without some rankling suspicion of her grand-daughter's economic foresight.

"What's the matter with William?" she asked her daughter-in-law after dinner. "When we were speaking of Marion Oliver just now, he went the colour of slugged milk."

"I think poor William's still in love with her," said Mrs. John.

"Then why don't they make it up? Won't she have him? I should think that a Topham was more than good enough for an Oliver."

"It's John," said Mrs. Topham.

"Tuts!" said the elder Mrs. Topham, "I'll talk to John."

So it fell out that on the Tuesday, Marion was invited to tea at her aunt's and found William there also.

The two turned very pale at meeting. William spoke hardly at all; Marion was very talkative. After tea Mrs. Topham sent them both into the garden.

"You have lovely flowers," said Marion shyly.

"Yes, only the governor won't have them picked," William answered ruefully. Sudden laughter eased Marion's tongue.

"You are afraid," she said gaily, "that I am going to ask you for one."

"No-o-o," said William sheepishly; then he broke a spray of yellow wallflower and gave it to her.

Marion tucked it in the bosom of her gown.

"You are living with very rich people, aren't you?" William asked her abruptly. "A grand house, lots of servants and that sort of thing?"

Marion nodded.

"Do you like it?" said William.

"Oh, fairly," replied Marion carelessly. "It's not like being at home, you know."

"I expect you will be marrying some rich chap?" William said suddenly, half sullenly.

"Once," answered Marion mischievously. "you asked me to marry you. You gave me a gilt ring with a sham pearl in it out of a prize-packet. Do you remember?"

"Did I?" said William.

Marion fumbled in her dress.

"There it is," she said. "Look."

"You really kept it," he exclaimed; "but, Marion —"

"I kept it," she said quietly, "because you gave it to me."

William eyed her incredulously. Then he found the words, "You cared, Marion,— Marion," he took her hand, "you cared!"

"Do you remember," she said impetuously, "that Sunday we dined here, mother and I and three of the children — and what your father said? I went out and cried under the laurels near the pump and I thought this the most hateful house I had ever been into."

"The governor doesn't mind now," said William, "so my mother says."

"Doesn't he?" demurely said Marion.

"I shall give you another ring," said William more boldly, "a real gold one with a real pearl."

"Will you?" said Marion.

"If you will let me," answered William humbly.

Later on William took her home; and when Marion had gone slowly up-stairs to the nursery, William had sought the surgery, where Dr. Oliver was making medicine.

When her father came, Marion was alone, looking out of the window.

"So," he said cheerily, pinching her cheek, "Maid Marion has got a sweetheart. Well, if you think you can be content as a farmer's wife, my child, I have no objection."

Marion blushed, smiled and kissed him.

"Of course I can," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

SECOND THOUGHTS

OLD Mrs. Topham having spoken to such a decided end, as we saw in our last chapter, Dr. Oliver, Mrs. Oliver and Marion were invited to dine at Belmont to celebrate the engagement.

Mrs. Oliver had heard the news with some amazement, but upon consideration, she had relinquished the more brilliant match she had anticipated without a sign and accepted William, who was at any rate tangible and of whom she was not afraid, with due thankfulness and a kiss, the more affectionate because her mother's part in the affair had raised hopes of farther reconciliation, that might in time lead to the legacy, upon which the little woman was, half unconsciously, building so many hopes.

On the night of the dinner-party therefore Mrs. Oliver, feeling unusually happy, looked in consequence more than usually well. Marion had dressed her and though the black silk she wore would never again look new, it was so adorned with lace by Marion's deft fingers, that it had an air quite gay and festive.

Marion looked paler than usual and she was very demure, until at dessert some broad allusions of her uncle's to the ends of matrimony, made the blood rush to her face and brought back the old proud look of disgust and dislike. She told her mother afterwards that she never could help detesting that coarse, horrid man, even though he were William's father.

Young Mrs. Topham had admonished her husband

at the time; but Mrs. Oliver had been too sensible of her new advantages to take umbrage at anything her brother might do or say. She had smoothed down the front of her gown, a trick of hers that often stirred the laughter of her children,—laughter in later years not far removed from pain; and had thought how nice it would be when Marion really was married and she could send batches of the children to stay with her at the Howe.

It was at dessert that Mr. Topham had laid down his plans for the young people's future. No marriage, said Mr. Topham, for a year. William at the end of that year was to rent the farm from his father and have things under his own control. "Then," concluded Mr. Topham affably, "he may take his bride home as soon as he has his cage ready."

William seemed pleased and Marion was pleased because he was; Mrs. Oliver and her husband were also satisfied; indeed Mrs. Oliver's satisfaction brimmed over when her mother, rousing from a nap she had had over her port, declared loudly she would always give her husband's namesake a helping hand.

In the drawing-room after dinner, where the covers had been removed from the chairs and the piano unlocked for Marion, who was a good pianist, to perform upon, her Aunt Eleanor had asked Marion if she would not like to spend a few days at the Howe with Mary. Marion had said "Yes, very much," and Mrs. Topham had arranged the matter without delay; though Miss Topham, who had been rather a wet blanket at the feast, had assented coldly.

"You must come," William had said, as he and Marion walked home behind the doctor and his wife; and the following afternoon he drove over for her in what had once been George Fall's favourite dog-cart, with

Miss Topham, who had insisted upon accompanying him, on the back seat.

No chaperon was more careful of appearances than Miss Mary Topham during the three days that her cousin stayed at the Howe. She never left them together for a moment. If William proposed a walk round the fields or in the orchard, she went too. If Marion rose an hour earlier, Miss Topham was sure to be down before her. In the evening she would sit sewing at the parlour table, chill and silent but obstinate in her determination to be with them at all costs; at bed-time when Marion stole into the hall to say good-night, Miss Topham would follow her and linger over the lighting of her candle, until her cousin, baffled and disappointed, had gone upstairs.

On the last night Ellen Thorpe came to the rescue.

Miss Topham kept poultry, not for any pleasure there might be in poultry-keeping but strictly for profit, and pay Miss Topham's poultry certainly did.

They had just finished their formal tea when Ellen Thorpe brought word that the Dorking cock could not be found, though she and old Tom Wintergill (Mary Ann's father had lived at the Howe since his wife's death) "had laiked ¹ him all over th' place."

Miss Topham rose immediately, all anxiety for the search; then she bethought herself of William and Marion and suggested that they should come and assist her. Marion, who had taken up a book, gently shook her head; William looked sulky but did not answer nor move.

"Old Tom says," said Ellen Thorpe, "that if you don't go after him afore dark, th' fox'll take him. There's been an old dog fox prowling round the runs these last two days."

¹ Laik — anglicè — to look for or search.

The fox decided Miss Topham. She cast a withering glance at her brother and cousin and left the room; a moment later they saw her, with her skirts well turned up above ankles that were by no means unsubstantial, hurrying towards a distant pasture, where Wintersgill, so said Ellen Thorpe, had seen the truant go.

Ellen Thorpe, who had also watched the sortie, now returned grim-faced as usual, to remove the tea things.

"T' auld cock," she said laconically, "he shut oop in th' calf-house. Thee had best take Miss Marion a walk by the Black Pond, Master William."

The two needed no second bidding. Marion ran for her hat, and five minutes later Ellen Thorpe saw them go into the garden hand in hand.

The Black Pond covered an acreage of the Howe farm, at which William, as the Falls before him, had often grumbled. George Fall's father had sought to drain it; but George himself from lack of means or else persistence had not troubled; and so the pond still remained, a sheet of water extending to the length of three great fields, fringed with reeds and sedges, shadowed by willows, swept by the uneasy wings of the plovers, the haunt of innumerable wild fowl that afforded good sport for William's gun.

For Marion and William walking along its rushy banks that evening, the Black Pond — with its waters crimson-stained by the sunset, the evening breeze crisping its surface to tiny wavelets, that broke musically along its edges, the song of thrush and blackbird coming to them from the thickets on its other bank — was Paradise; and they — for a brief space — of that Enchanted Few that walk therein.

Miss Topham was at her supper when they came back. She looked red and angry. After a fruitless search the cock had been found safe in the hen-roost

and Miss Mary knew she had been tricked. She spoke not a word to the culprits and went to bed after supper, leaving the lovers to say good-night as they listed. The next morning she did not appear at breakfast nor later, when the dog-cart came round and Marion waited in the hall to say good-bye.

At the end of the week Marion returned to London, leaving her reputation at the mercy of Miss Topham, who, whenever she had a listener, belaboured it beyond hope of redemption.

William, as his mother had foretold, became more contented after his engagement. He turned a deaf ear to his sister and absorbed himself in the farm, though the weekly wage his father doled out to him was far from encouraging. In consequence preparations at the Howe for Marion's coming were but tardy; and the big half-furnished house often seemed to mock his efforts. Miss Mary refused her aid in any way. That Marion was to succeed her was a bitter pill to the young lady; and she never failed to snub any confidence William attempted to make her on the subject.

But on the whole William was happy,—happier indeed contemplating the mirage of their life together—his and Marion's—than he was ever to be again. For after all, is not happiness mainly illusion and its anticipation the will-o'-th'-wisp that ever flits across the often dreary marshes of our lives?

In the old grey Norfolk manor house, Marion too was thinking of her marriage but after a different fashion to William. For her there were no cares; the purchase of a wardrobe for her room, the necessity of a dining-room carpet, the question of new curtains, these things troubled her not at all. William wrote of them in his letters to her and she wrote back to him, smiling as she wrote, not to mind.

Marion's dream was one almost purely of the senses, — very sweet, very thrilling in those June night hours when, lying wakeful in her bed, she would listen to the nightingales singing in the park,—but more elusive than William's and destined at the first crude touches of reality to burst like the prismatic tinted bubble a child blows in sport through a clay pipe.

Marion's life was a luxurious one and she had adapted herself to ease and soft living as if such had been her right from birth. Mrs. Ryder was fond of her and treated her very much as she might have done had Marion been really what she often styled her, "her deputy daughter." She took her everywhere and Marion was accustomed to mix with people between whom and those she knew at Burnthorpe,—her father's Yorkshire bluntness, her mother's fussy mediocrity, her uncle's boastful pomposity, even her Aunt Eleanor's simple kindliness,—there appeared no comparative equality to Marion's youthful shallowness.

Moreover the Hon. Mrs. Ryder had not been pleased with her protégée's engagement. She had intended another partner for Marion in the person of her own estate agent, a penniless youth but of good family; and she told the girl quite frankly, that in marrying a farmer (her emphatic contempt of the homely cailing made Marion wince), she was throwing herself away.

With William denied her by his father, it was curious how the fulfilment of their boy and girl idyll had seemed to Marion necessary to her happiness; but William hers, it was still more curious and, to the student of psychology suggestive, how, her ardour cooled beneath the cold persistent douche of Mrs. Ryder's unsympathetic comments, she could calmly consider him, contrast him with the other men she met and weigh in the balance the wisdom of her choice.

It was August before she returned to Burnthorpe, and the place had never seemed to her more prosaic. She had spent July with Mrs. Ryder and her elderly bachelor brother at a gay French watering-place, where the very air seemed to vibrate with excitement, where the *plage* had been thronged all day with *toilettes* and the Casino at night had seemed a shifting panorama of light, of dress, of music and delight.

At home there was nothing, it seemed to Marion, but the old complaints about money, the sins of the over-worked general, the expenses of the children's education and so forth.

Marion volunteered to take the children for a day's excursion to Scarboro'. She came back more out of temper than is usually the case with conscious virtue, her cotton frock crumpled and wet, and the determination fixed in her heart, that never again would she take a tribe of children to the sea-side.

Next day Annie had artlessly confided to her mother that on the south shore, Marion had suddenly caught sight of some of Mrs. Ryder's acquaintances and had made a precipitate retreat.

Mrs. Oliver was much aggrieved.

"I am sure the children looked very nice," she said to Marion, "you need not have been ashamed of them."

And as Marion did not answer, she added a little viciously,

"Only wait until you are married to William Topham and have a family of your own. You may not find it so easy then to keep them as spick and span as you would wish."

At which Marion burst into angry tears and ran out of the room.

That afternoon her Aunt Eleanor came round in the pony chaise to drive her to the Howe.

"William has not been over to see me yet," said Marion, with a touch of resentment as she took the reins from Mary Ann.

"It's harvest time," her aunt said soothingly, "they work so late, he won't have been able to get away."

"I think he should have come all the same," said Marion, feeling that it did her good to have even this small grievance on her side.

The Howe lands lay in a blaze of sunshine; and in one of the wheat fields by the road side stood William superintending the loading of a waggon. His coat was off, his shirt open at the neck, and he stood erect and manly, his physique improved by the farm life, his face tanned by health and weather. Mrs. Topham, beaming with maternal pride, rose in the chaise and waved to him; and even Marion at the sight of this lusty young manhood all aglow on her account, felt a subtle thrill of pleasure.

"I'll be in to tea," he shouted and as the chaise moved on, he waved his hand to Marion with a gesture that was almost a caress.

At the house itself things wore the cold orderly aspect that was part and parcel of Miss Topham's régime. Her greeting to Marion had no warmth in it.

"I," she said with injured emphasis, "get no time to drive about the country."

"Marion has come to see William," said Mrs. Topham genially, "besides it is her holiday."

"Then I suppose you want tea," said Miss Mary ungraciously.

Mrs. Topham removed her bonnet,

"Of course we do," she said good-naturedly. "Marion will go to meet William whilst Ellen gets it ready."

Marion moved away, her cousin watching her through the window.

"She's finer than ever," she exclaimed disgustedly. "Why on earth did you bring her, mama?"

"Considering she's to be William's wife, Polly, need you ask?"

Miss Mary tossed her head.

"If I could keep her out, I would stay here all my life," she said vindictively.

"They'll be married in the Spring, I trust," replied Mrs. Topham gently.

Unpleasantly conscious that she left criticism behind her, Marion walked on. The forlorn aspect of the house chilled her, and as she glanced back at it, set alone there amidst the fields, she asked herself disconsolately,—“Would she ever settle there? Was it all a mistake?” William saw her in the distance and came striding across the stubble to meet her, the sun gleaming on his bronzed face.

"Marion!" he said, and the next moment her doubts and fears were forgotten in the shelter of his arms.

CHAPTER XVII

OLD MRS. TOPHAM

EARLY that winter,—the winter that was to herald the Spring of William Topham's marriage,—it began to be whispered in Burnthorpe that the elder Mrs. Topham was failing.

One day coming downstairs unaided as her custom was, her foot caught and threw her forward. Fortunately Miss Mallaby, a picture of resignation at the stair foot, was able to catch her and to a certain extent save her the full danger of the fall. But the shock told. Poor old Mrs. Topham never went downstairs again without clinging gratefully to Mallaby's arm; some days indeed she would not have descended them at all had it not been for Mallaby's insistence.

"Once she takes to her bed she'll stick to it and I know what that means," Miss Mallaby, who had no desire for prolonged sick-nursing, confided to her friends.

But the change, the change that marks so plainly the inevitable end and that Mallaby endeavoured thus to postpone, had already begun. Daily the old woman grew more feeble, more irritable, more childish.

The old Sedan chair with its green rep curtains and gilded poles,—a survival from days long past, that had carried her regularly to the weekly Dorcas Meeting at the Vicarage or to her daughter-in-law's tea parties came one day and went back unoccupied. It was not sent for again.

"What do you think of mother?" Mrs. Oliver said to her husband, who had been called in by Mallaby early in December.

"She's breaking up, my dear."

The tears came into Mrs. Oliver's eyes. She had been a good daughter and dutiful except for that one episode, when she had sacrificed all for James Oliver; and in spite of old Mrs. Topham's harsh treatment, she was still a loving daughter.

"I must go to her," she said to her husband. "Mallaby is all very well but she isn't like her own."

She went that same afternoon and was refused admittance; the next day she went again; the third she pushed her way past Mallaby and entered the cheerless sitting-room.

The old woman peered at her with blinking eyes.

"Who is it?" she said.

Mrs. Oliver dropped down on her knees beside her.

"It is I, mama, dear mama, it's Sarah."

The old woman's bony fingers played with her hands.

"Why, it's Sarah," she said with a weak laugh, "it's little Sarah."

"You see," said Mrs. Oliver indignantly to Miss Mallaby, "how dared you keep me out?"

"I had my orders," primly replied Miss Mallaby,—not without a significant resentment.

Mrs. Oliver was never again refused the entrance to her mother's house, but her reception varied. She never knew whether she should find the harsh austere tyrant with her unjust and cruel reproaches, or the fretful, querulous child, or the forlorn creature who clung helplessly to her, calling her "Sarah, little Sarah,—Sarah, don't leave me."

Once only did old Mrs. Topham refer to her Will. On Christmas Eve to give Mallaby a night's rest, Mrs. Oliver had sat up with her. Mrs. Topham had slept laddy and early in the morning Mrs. Oliver stole downstairs to send away the waits. They crossed obediently

enough to the other side of the Square, but for all that their voices, chanting some familiar Christmas canticle, reached the quiet room.

The old woman roused herself and listened.

"That's nice," she said drowsily. Then she called her daughter's name and looked searchingly into her face.

"You should be in bed, Sarah," she said deprecatingly, "not sitting up with an old thing like me. But you shan't be forgotten," she gripped her hand and spoke with an almost defiant earnestness, "you shan't be passed over. You have been a good daughter and you shall have your reward!"

"Hush, mama," said Mrs. Oliver, and said it sincerely. "Don't trouble about that."

Later as she crossed the Market Square on her way home, the slush and sludge penetrating through her worn boots, she recalled her mother's words with a pleasant feeling that a time might be coming when new boots would not appear such a prodigal necessity. She thought of them again when she reached the house and found the children full of excitement over the day's simple pleasures. To their mother there was always something pathetic in this delight of theirs over the poor presents, that were all she and their father could afford to give them; and a "perhaps next year," rose naturally to her mind.

James Oliver was making up medicine in the surgery; she went to him there and began directing labels.

"You will see," she said to him presently, "Mama won't leave me out of her Will after all, James."

"How do you know?"

"She says so," replied Mrs. Oliver with a touch of triumph. "It has been John who has made all the mischief. Mallaby owned as much the other day when she

said she had orders not to admit me. They were not mama's orders. I feel convinced."

James Oliver held his measure to the light. His wife's optimism infected him not at all. Since his marriage, existence for him had been not unlike the toiling of some overladen beast along some steep, rough and narrow way. There had never been any slackening of the burthen, nor any promise of relief and much sooner than his wife he had accepted his lot and ceased to chafe. One day perhaps, when he had got to the very end of his road, then and only then would his yoke be loosed.

"You don't seem to believe me, James," his wife said reproachfully. "Think what a little money would mean to us, help with the boys and a better education for the girls, and,"—she looked wistfully at her husband, "perhaps an easier life for you."

He pulled on his heavy driving coat without speaking, and over the wire blind Mrs. Oliver saw the gig waiting in the yard.

"I wonder why it is," she said fretfully, "people can give you no rest even on Christmas Day."

James Oliver smiled grimly.

"I shall get rest some day," he said, "but it won't be this side of the grave. I'm going into the dale, so don't keep dinner. And," he turned at the door, "if anything urgent turns up, better send David after me on the cob."

Mrs. Oliver watched him drive away and as she watched, a little smile that was wholly tender came over her worn face.

"Poor James," she said to herself, "he's so used to bad luck, he can't believe in any better now."

There was only one urgent message for Dr. Oliver that Christmas morning; and David took it, sending his

cob at break-neck speed along the up-hill road to the dale.

Old Mrs. Topham had had a seizure.

Mrs. Oliver threw a shawl over her head and ran across the Square just as she was, whilst Marion slipped into her place and continued the interrupted helping of plum-pudding and mince pies.

"Do you think grandmama will die?" asked Annie, who was feeding the baby.

"If she does," said a youthful brother, "it will be jolly nice for whoever she leaves her money to. She's got trunks and trunks full. I say—" he paused dramatically with fork uplifted,—“what if she left it to mother?”

When Dr. Oliver arrived the patient had rallied a little. She had opened her eyes; she could distinguish the anxious faces round her bed, her daughter's, Eleanor Topham, but she couldn't move and she couldn't speak.

All that afternoon she remained passive and inert, taking no notice, attempting no movement until at eight o'clock in the evening her son came in on his way from Church. As he stood by the bed looking down not without concern at the wreck that lay there, old Mrs. Topham raised her sunken lids, her eyes protruded and, beneath the counterpane, one could detect the twitter and twitch of the helpless limbs; the dry lips began to mouth and mumble and once or twice sounds came, inarticulate, horrible, yet shrill with dumb anguish.

"She wants to say something," said Mrs. Oliver. She bent over the bed.—“Mama, what is it?”

"She wants to speak to you, John," said Eleanor Topham to her husband.

Mr. Topham shook his head.

"Can't you help her? Can't you guess?" his wife said again.

"Get a pencil and paper," he said hoarsely. "We will see if she can write."

Paper and pencil were brought. Mr. Topham, his wife, Mrs. Oliver, each in turn tried to guide the powerless fingers, but in vain.

Baffled and exhausted the old woman closed her eyes, and Mr. Topham, after watching her in silence for a moment, turned from the bed and went downstairs. His wife followed him and they entered the dining-room.

The room was as it had been at the time of the attack. Mallaby's meagre dinner was still spread upon the table; at one end the cloth was yellow with the spilt yoke of an egg, and a glass of water had been overturned.

Miss Mallaby had described the scene graphically;—"She was h'eating of her h'egg, when suddenly she let the spoon turn over and it all dribbled down the body of her dress. And then she just slid off her chair sideways like this"—young Mrs. Topham shuddered as she thought of it.

"John," she said almost beseechingly, "have you really no idea what it is?" She lowered her voice to a whisper. "It's not the Will, do you think?"

"How do I know?" the lawyer said testily. He sat down in an arm-chair and lit his pipe; his wife seated herself opposite with her troubled face turned to the fire. Through the thin ceiling they could hear the stertorous breathing of the old woman, the creak of Mrs. Oliver's tread across the floor, the noise of a poker timidly inserted in the grate.

"Mama, what is it?"

The old woman had slowly moved her head. Her

eyes were open and their gaze held her daughter's in an intensity of longing.

"Poor mama," said Mrs. Oliver again. "What can it be?"

From her post of observation at the bed foot Mallaby could see her mistress's tongue wagging between her toothless jaws like some noiseless pendulum in its ghastly impotency of speech. Then with a great effort came the same terrible wordless cry.

It wakened Mr. Topham, who had fallen asleep with his pipe hanging upside down, and he sprang to his feet. His wife rose too. In the room above all was quiet again; then a faltering step came down the stairs and along the passage and Mrs. Oliver entered with streaming eyes.

"It's over," she said. Then she went close to her brother and stood before him.

"Oh, John," she said through her sobs, "whatever did poor mama want to say?"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE WILL

AMONG the good people of Burnthorpe old Mrs. Topham's funeral was long remembered. Ordinary folk had been content to have their coffins carried shoulder high even though the way to the Church was long and one's acquaintance had to be canvassed for a double shift of bearers; but to convey what remained of old Mrs. Topham the short distance that lay between her house and the Church gates a ceremonial hearse, with carved black panels and black angels weeping at each of its four corners, and nodding plumes at its head, and two black horses with sweeping tails, were requisitioned all the way from Markington.

I was a child at the time but I can still remember clinging in sudden panic to my nurse's hand as, crossing the snow-covered Square, we saw the ugly thing standing outside the Inn. The horses were out and its shafts lay long and black and ominous across the snow. Who, I wondered then in my simplicity, had dared to take a drive in such an awful coach?

From Mrs. Topham's house to the Church gates the snow was churned into brown ugly slush; for the funeral had been a large one, the largest, so said the gossips, since that of old Lady Metcalfe's husband years ago. She, by the way, on this occasion had sent her carriage with no one in it as a last and empty compliment to the deceased — and to Mr. Topham.

I expect now as we crossed the Square from our walk, glad enough to get our backs turned to those fearsome plumes and hellish-looking angels, that the chief

mourners were already gathered in old Mrs. Topham's parlour for the reading of the Will. At any rate the house had assumed its normal aspect, for the woman in charge had drawn up the blinds and removed the crape from the knocker, whilst Lady Metcalfe's thoroughbreds and the horses in the hearse were still *champing and chafing in front of the Church gates.*

At the head of the dining-table, in his mother's chair, sat Mr. Topham; and whilst the others arranged themselves, Miss Mallaby, who had quite a festal air in her new mourning, which glistened with jet beads, hastened to place upon the table a substantial cake, a plate of biscuits, decanters of port and sherry and a tray of wine glasses.

On a low chair by the fire sat Mrs. Oliver, still holding a sodden-looking black-bordered handkerchief in her hand, although at present she had both forgotten the handkerchief and her need for it, for her attention was concentrated on Mr. Topham and her eager eyes never left his face. Marion, who was sitting on the horse-hair sofa at the other side of the room, was thinking how well her mother looked. It was rarely Mrs. Oliver had the opportunity of getting herself new clothes, but on this occasion everything she wore was both new and good and the improvement to her appearance was indubitable. "Why shouldn't you, mama?" Marion had said, when in the choosing of the mourning raiment economical considerations had twinged Mrs. Oliver's conscience; and Mrs. Oliver had yielded with the secret confidence that her mother's Will would prove her reward and with invariably the same excuse — that for Marion held an unconscious touch of humour — "I am sure that dear mama wouldn't like me to make a poor appearance at her funeral."

Beside her husband sat Eleanor Topham, interested

too but manifestly anxious and depressed. Mrs. Oliver, glancing covertly at her, had the satisfaction of knowing that for once she could score over her sister-in-law. Black did not suit Mrs. John, whose plump features against her sable trappings looked unusually pale and heavy. Dr. Oliver had taken a chair at the table. His wife had insisted on his buying a new pair of boots for the funeral, and they pinched him. He looked at the clock impatiently, eager to get into his customary clothes, his old boots, and be at work again. Henry, whom his father had insisted should attend — greatly to his disgust — stood beside his uncle, looking sulkily and not a little bored. Miss Topham in handsome mourning of her father's ordering, had posted herself in the window, whence she could direct one eye over his shoulder and the other towards her brother William, who had sidled shamefacedly on to the sofa beside Marion.

Miss Mallaby, having arranged her little feast upon the table, had fluttered into an obscure corner behind the door, where she sat with hands folded demurely in her lap, but her small eyes watching every movement of the lawyer's, with eyes as bright and darting as a robin's. Mr. Topham broke the seals, cleared his throat and looked over his spectacles at the expectant group. In the silence of the attentive room nothing was heard except the sound James Oliver made rubbing his tight boots one against the other. His wife glanced at him admonishingly, then riveted her eyes again upon her brother's face.

Mr. Topham cleared his throat.

William, who was losing interest, took advantage of Miss Topham's preoccupation in what she could distinguish by spying over her father's shoulder, to take possession of Marion's hand. It lay in his cold and

unresponsive, but that it should lie there was happiness enough for William Topham.

"I, Jane Topham of Burnthorpe in the county of Yorkshire, widow, declare this to be my last Will and testament.

"I hereby," continued Mr. Topham, "revoke all former wills, codicils, and testamentary dispositions at any time made by me. And I do hereby give and bequeath, absolutely and entirely, the whole of my estate both real and personal without any reservation whatsoever, to my beloved —"

Mr. Topham stumbled. Everyone except Mrs. John and William leaned forward.

"To my beloved son —

"To my — beloved — son — John Topham."

The lawyer stopped, touched his lips with the wine, Miss Mallaby had thoughtfully poured out for him, and looked round, ere he resumed "and I appoint my said son to be the Executor of this my Will. That is all," he said.

"All!" someone repeated incredulously. It was Mrs. Topham.

Miss Mallaby lay back in her chair, making queer little gurgling sounds in her throat like a person drowning; but, Mrs. Oliver, white as the unsullied snow that had begun to fall again, sprang to her feet and snatched the parchment from her brother's hand. Mrs. Topham instinctively hid her face as the brother and sister glared at one another across the table as if no bond of blood nor tie of things familiar had ever been between them.

"But it can't be true," said Mrs. Oliver incoherently. "You are hiding something. This can't be the Will. There must be another"

"This is the only Will," said Mr. Topham.

"But she has left you all," shrieked Mrs. Oliver. And Mallab's voice rose in an accompanying crescendo, that threatened hysteria.

Dr. Oliver forgot his boots and relieved his feelings by slapping Miss Mallaby's hands. Henry's eyes gleamed with excitement.

Mr. Topham took a biscuit from the plate and began to crumble it mechanically; then another and another until quite a little mountain of crumbs lay on the cloth before him.

"Is there," Eleanor Topham asked faintly, "is there no codicil?"

"No," her husband thundered at her. "There is no codicil. The Will is as you have heard it. If Sarah is not satisfied — if she has had any expectations —" he threw a contemptuous glance at poor Mrs. Oliver's new mourning — "all I can say is, it was not our mother's fault. She never raised her hopes and Sarah knows that as well as I do."

"And whose fault was that?" asked Mrs. Oliver; and there was something in her voice that made her husband turn from the overwrought Mallaby to say soothingly, "Sarah, Sarah!"

But Mrs. Oliver would not be stayed. The bit was between her teeth, and the thought of her mourning bills to be met with nothing, spurred her on.

"Yours," she repeated, "you were always against me, always coming between mama and me and making all the mischief that you could. It was you who set her against James, although let me tell you, he's twenty times a better man than you are: and in spite of all the poverty and trouble we've had, I have never regretted our marriage, never!"

"Glad to hear it," said Mr. Topham grimly.

"But you," continued his sister with bitter scorn,

"if someone were to offer me all the money you have, I wouldn't be in your shoes. For over twenty years you kept me from my mother and you would still have kept me from her if you could. Even in this last illness you told Mallaby not to admit me. And I believe," her voice fell impressively, "that you knew all the time what it was she tried so hard to say."

"And what was that?" asked Mr. Topham.

His wife bent towards him. "John," she said piteously. "John!"

Mrs. Oliver held out the Will. "She wanted to make this right," she said more quietly, "she told me herself, 'Sarah, you shall not be forgotten'—She did forgive and turn to me at the last— That at least you can't take from me, though you may the money."

"John," his wife said again; and Miss Mary corrected her sharply,— "Do be quiet, mama!"

"It's all very well for you to say be quiet, miss," here interposed Miss Mallaby, who had sufficiently recovered to advance to the table. "But what about me? Me, that has served your grandma all these years almost for nothing as you might say, thinking as how it would all be made up to me afterwards and refused good h'offers I have too, believing as how I shouldn't need to marry for a home at any rate—and now here I am—" Miss Mallaby reached the climax with a burst of tears,— "hofferless and 'omeless. What about me!"

Mr. Topham cleared his throat.

"I don't want to be hard on anyone," he began and his wife looked at him with a dawning hope in her eyes. "The Will was made at my mother's wish. I thought at the time that it was a hard Will and I said so. But you know mother—" he looked from one face to the other, meeting none openly yet covertly ob-

serving all, "her mind was made up and I couldn't change it."

"You didn't try to," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Sarah!" said her husband.

Mr. Topham ignored the interruption.

"I am not a hard man, I don't want to be unjust to anyone. I am quite willing to give Sarah any little thing from the house that she may like. And as to Mallaby, she shall have five pounds for a mourning ring and remain here as caretaker until she finds another post or a —" the lawyer tried hard to be jocose — "or a husband."

"If I'd have foreseen this," exclaimed Miss Mallaby vindictively, "I'd have let her alter her Will that time as she wanted to, the year that Mary Ann Wintersgill came to Belmont."

Mrs. Oliver sprang to her feet.

"You hear," she said, and at the ringing note of her voice Mrs. Topham glanced apprehensively at the window,—"mother wanted to do right and he wouldn't let her. He tells me to take something from the house. I tell him I will take nothing until he gives me what is mine by right!"

"That I won't," said Mr. Topham decidedly.

"I never expected it," retorted his sister.

"Come, come, Sarah," said her husband, "you can make no better of it. Let us be going."

"Not yet," said Mrs. Oliver, "not until I tell him what I think of him. I consider he has robbed me and my children just the same as if he were a thief that had come stealing into the house. Look at the Falls, his own friends, how he seized their farm and sold up every stick they had. Look at the grand house he has built himself out of other people's money—" Mr. Topham winced perceptibly. "Look at his dealings with

yourself, James, if you borrowed ten he'd make you pay back twenty. Usurer and thief," screamed Mrs. Oliver, "I can tell him this—a day will come when all his money won't comfort him—when—" her voice sank to noisy sobs.

James Oliver signed to Marion, who was looking on with disgust in her face. To her her mother's outburst savoured less of the divine fury of a Clytemnestra than of racked nerves and a temper ill controlled. She came forward now and put her arm about her mother's waist.

"Mama, come," she said coldly.

As they passed William, who held the door open for them, Marion dropped something into his hand, and looking down he saw the little ring he had given her as a token of their engagement.

James Oliver took his hat.

"Well, I will wish you good-day," he said politely and with relief.

William slipped out after him and Henry followed.

They left behind them a silence that for the moment was broken only by Mrs. Topham's sobs. Then Miss Topham got up.

"Someone ought to go through grandmama's things," she said, "I shall do so now."

"Better take Mallaby with you," suggested Mr. Topham with a geniality that surprised everyone.

Mallaby rose at once, swallowed something visibly as if she had reduced her indignation to a pill and so disposed of it, and preening down the beaded front of her dress, meekly replied,

"If you really wish for a caretaker, sir, I shall be very pleased to remain."

"Certainly," suavely answered Mr. Topham.

And though at her father's change of front, Miss

Topham's glance and Mallaby's had crossed like swords, Miss Mary suffered her to follow her from the room.

When they had gone, Mr. Topham turned to his wife.

"Well," he said roughly. "Perhaps when you have finished crying you will let me take you home."

CHAPTER XIX

THE RUPTURE

BEFORE the next Dorcas Party had assembled at the Vicarage, the division between the families of Topham and Oliver was a well-known fact; and neither Mrs. Topham nor Mrs. Oliver being present, though both were members, the ladies' tongues had full liberty of wagging. They turned the thing as it were inside out; they unpicked it; they added a patch here; they darned it there: and they left it at last a motley garment half truth, half falsehood, and wholly scandalous.

Although none of them had been present at the reading of the Will, all knew what had taken place there. One added a gesture; the other a word; one personated Miss Mallaby; another was Marion, who had, it was told, climaxed the situation by hurling a glass at her uncle's head. On the whole sympathy ran with the winning side; the Tophams were so generous with their money; they gave such nice parties; Mr. Topham so thoroughly deserved his good fortune; and how kind they had been to the poor old lady.

Mrs. Webb, the Banker's wife had it on the authority of Mrs. Thackary, the spouse of the local game-dealer, that only at the beginning of the winter Mr. Topham had given the Thackarys a standing order to supply his mother with the choicest of fish and game.

Here a spinster, who had the name of being satirical and was certainly spiteful, tittered and remarked,

"Well, it hadn't been for very long anyway."

"But the Will was there," the Banker's wife said reproachfully.

"Where the will is good," began the Vicar's wife

— she had the impression she was quoting scripture and paused in an effort to recall chapter and verse.

The talk turned to the Olivers.

"Really, it will do the Olivers good," said the Banker's wife complacently. "It will take them down a little."

"I don't believe in people who are so poor being so proud," said another, who was also Mrs. Oliver's best friend.

"That ridiculous Marion!" said someone else.

"Yes, Marion," said the Vicar's wife, quite relieved to be able to add a mite, that might be attributed less to gossip than to matronly wisdom, "she really is too proud."

"I am sure if she cared to make herself a bit sociable when she's at home, my girls would only be too glad of her company, though she is a governess," said the retired Draper's wife aggrievedly. "There was no need for her girls to go out. There once had been, but who remembers ancient history except in the face of misfortune?"

"It seems almost unnatural the way she goes walking alone," said Mrs. Webb, "I wonder she isn't afraid of tramps."

"Perhaps she isn't alone," said the Draper's wife meaningly.

"She may be like Elias," said the satirical spinster. Then she remembered she was being profane as well as flippant before the Vicar's wife had had time to realise why she ought to look shocked.

A stout lady took up the tale picusly.

"I'm sure," she said, "it's an escape for young Topham."

"Anyone more unsuited for a farmer's wife," chimed in the Draper's lady, "I never set eyes on."

"Not like *my* dear pet," said Mrs. Webb, "'Oh, mama,' she said the other day,—we had driven over to have tea with Mary Topham—'what do you think? Little lambs are born in pairs with their eyes open and their wool on.' Wasn't it simple? Before William too!"

The satirical spinster said "Insane!" rudely; the retired Draper's wife smiled disdainfully; between her girls and the Banker's daughter there was no little rivalry and so few eligible young men.

"My girls," she said pointedly, "are learning to make butter."

"So is Elsie," Elsie's mama hastened to inform her. "Dear child, she said to me the other day, 'Oh, mama, do let me put a buttercup in the churn to make it yellow.'"

"Well, I am thankful," fervently exclaimed her rival, "that none of my girls would be so silly."

And from the thin lips of the spinster the word "common sense" dropped with the precision of a pebble. The Vicar's wife hastened to pour oil on the troubled waters.

"Really, I think the idea rather pretty," she said, "and so like Elsie too—she is such a romantic little thing," and then as the Draper's wife began a liturgically sounding sentence to the effect that, "if that were romance she was devoutly thankful"—and so on, the Vicar's wife turned everyone's attention to the work.

"I think we shall be proud of our sale this year, don't you, Mrs. Thompson? It was such a good idea of yours to make cotton dresses, Mrs. Webb. We are so well off for underclothes too,—that's Mrs. Topham's fifth chemise lying on the basket."

"And Mrs. Oliver's second harden apron," said the spinster.

"I wonder why she always uses harden," hazarded Mrs. Oliver's best friend.

"Symbolical," said the spinster.

"Do you know," broke in Elsie's fond parent rapturously, "what my dear pet said this morning — 'Dear mama. I should so like to learn to make a shirt!' — Wasn't it sweet of the dear innocent?"

"Why shouldn't she?" retorted Mrs. Thompson scornfully. "My girls can make shirts and mend them too."

The Vicar's wife, who had found her place in the "History of a Mission in China," began to read aloud hurriedly.

"I am going round to ask how dear Mrs. Topham is," said Mrs. Oliver's best friend at the end of the afternoon to Mrs. Webb, "will you come with me?"

No one suggested going to see Mrs. Oliver. But then it was not known that Mrs. Oliver was ill, or if she was, it could only be of worldly disappointment, with which no virtuous person can have much sympathy. If any place were calculated to cast a chill upon one, it was the aspect of Belmont that day. The great griffins that the lawyer had perched upon the stone pillars of the gateway, looked in the fading light with their open jaws, whose fangs would shame the horrors of a fairy tale, their impassive wings and scaly tails curled tight round their taloned feet, more like some monsters of the nether world than the symbols of nobility. A dense row of dripping laurels screened the garden proper from the gravelled path that led to the house. They were curiously forbidding in their quiet, these laurels. No birds ever twittered there or built their nests in their green fastnesses. Mr. Topham didn't like birds. He had forbidden his wife to waste bread-crumbs upon them during the winter; in the

Spring and Summer he waged incessant war against them. The swallows' nests were torn from the eaves; the sparrows' nests from the garden ivy; the black-birds and thrushes were caught in traps and nets; and so at last the birds, save for one or two undaunted sparrows, came to shun Mr. Topham's garden and Spring there became as silent as the voiceless Summer.

Mary Ann opened the door, neat, rosy-faced, alert yet modest, and meeting the ladies' catechism with ready yet composed answering.

"Mrs. Topham was better but still in bed."

"Was it anything serious?"

"A severe cold. She had taken a chill at the funeral."

"Dear devoted thing," said the ladies together.

Mary Ann let the remark pass unnoticed.

"Could they see her?"

Mary Ann thought not, but she would go and see.

She was back speedily.

"No, Mrs. Topham did not feel well enough to see visitors to-day."

Would Mary Ann give her their love?

Certainly she would.

When Mary Ann went upstairs again, she took the tea-tray with her.

"You got them away, did you?" Mrs. Topham asked anxiously from the bed.

"Yes, they're gone, mam," said Mary Ann. She busied herself as she spoke, pulling a little table to the fire, placing the tray upon it, drawing her mistress' chair to the hearth. Then she took a dressing-gown from the wardrobe and went with it to the bedside.

"It would do you so much more good if you would get up and have your tea, mam," she said coaxingly.

"Do you think so?" said Mrs. Topham

"I'm sure," said Mary Ann.

"Well, if it will please you."

"Here's toast," said Mary Ann, "and an egg poached just as you like it. You will try and eat it — won't you, mam?"

"Mary Ann," her mistress said affectionately, "you are as good as a daughter to me."

If Mrs. Topham had a cold, neither cough nor sneeze betrayed her; and yet as she sat there with no light but that of the fire — which is generally glamorous, — her face looked pinched and worn.

It was ten days since the funeral and in Mrs. Topham's world things were as far as ever from being righted. Mr. Topham had been rock against her entreaties to make some restitution of her mother's property to Sarah; and to emphasize further the futility of her protestations he had gone to London.

"Better send for a doctor from Markington," he had said, when he returned to find his wife ailing. And when Mrs. Topham, whose doctor since her marriage had been James Oliver, had indignantly negatived the proposal, he had told her harshly,

"Well, send for that fellow if you like, only don't let me come across him."

But Mrs. Topham had had no one, and there being sickness of the mind as well as of the body, it is to be doubted if physic would have cured her. Indeed the poor lady would have been at no small loss herself to describe her ailment for diagnosis; though with Job she might have asked truthfully — "Why is light given to a man whose way is hid?"

She moved forward to stir the fire and the door opened.

"Why, William, I never heard you."

"I left my horse at the Bull. Is my father in?"

"No, he's at the Guardians' meeting at Markington. He will be back about seven, I expect."

William Topham came forward and stood looking moodily down into the fire. He hadn't kissed his mother; indeed, Henry was the only one who ever did that, demonstrations of affection being rare in the Topham family.

"You look ill, William," his mother said anxiously. William passed his hand over his face.

"I've been up amongst the ewes two nights and out amongst them all day to-day and I haven't shaved."

"You'll go to bed to-night, won't you?"

"Yes, I think I will though I expect my father'll grumble. I could never work hard enough for him."

A shade of pain crossed Mrs. Topham's face but she held her peace.

William broke the silence abruptly.

"What do you think of this Will?"

"You know what I think, William," she answered mildly. "I am hoping that when your father has had time to think matters over quietly, he will see himself that it is unjust and be willing to give poor Sarah her share."

"He never will."

"We do 't know, William," his mother said gently. "You must remember he is irritated and angry now. Your Aunt Sarah did upset him—"

"She told him some home truths anyway," William interrupted her roughly.

"But we none of us like home truths," said Mrs. Topham.

William shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"And how is Marion?" asked Mrs. Topham.

William's face went very white.

"That's over," he said shortly.

"But have you seen her?"

"I wrote to her the other day and she returned my letter unopened. She also sent back the presents I had given her."

William's voice was husky with hurt shame; and Mrs. Topham watching him compassionately felt her eyes fill. She could understand how the return of his presents would wound him; their very paltriness would add a sting, for William had not much with which to make presents, nor was he of a giving nature.

"I called there to-night," continued William, "and Annie told me she had gone back to Norfolk. She went to-day."

"Did you see your uncle?"

"He was out and Aunt Sarah wouldn't see me."

"Don't grieve, William lad," his mother said soothingly. "It will all come right in time. At any rate your father has promised me not to interfere between you and Marion."

William laughed harshly.

"Not interfere indeed! As if he hadn't interfered all along. As if he wasn't always interfering with someone or other. He got me to the Howe and made me work there like any dayle-man; and when he saw I was about sick of it, he threw Marion to me for a sop. And I have worked for her," William ended passionately, "you know I have, mother."

Mrs. Topham bent her head.

"What right has he over our lives at all?" continued William. "Though he is our father, it gives him no right that I can see to step in and say—'Thou shalt not do this—thou shalt not do that'—and spoil the game for us everlastingly. I say he has no right."

"Hush, hush, William," Mrs. Topham said timidly. "You are talking like Mary."

"Then Mary's the only sensible one of the lot," William said dryly. "Mary —"

"Come, come, what's all the talk about?"

It was Mr. Topham, still in his driving coat. He came to the fire and drawing off his woollen gloves, held his numb fingers to the blaze. "I thought you were over throng with the ewes to make visits, William," he said to his son.

"He came over to see how I was, love," Mrs. Topham said quickly.

"Very good of him I'm sure."

"I'm going back now," William said sullenly. He stooped, an unwonted action for him, and kissed his mother on the forehead,—"Good-night."

Mrs. Topham laid a detaining hand upon his sleeve.

"William," she said, looking appealingly at her husband, "is in trouble about Marion, John."

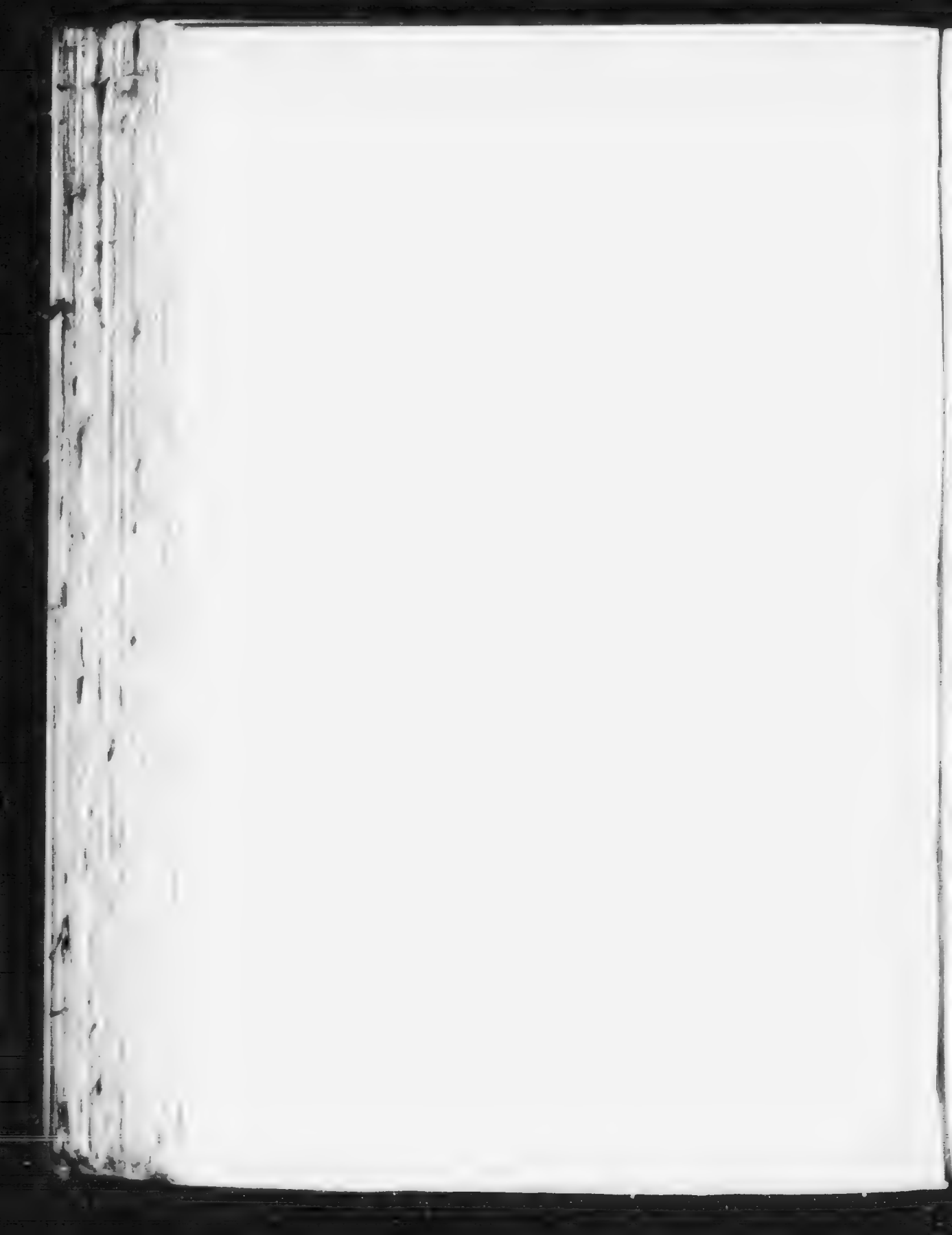
"And what about Marion?" the lawyer asked roughly.

William muttered something indistinctly.

"She has given him up," Mrs. Topham explained.

"Given him up, has she?" repeated Mr. Topham. "Then let her give him up. Play the man, sir, and shew the damned jade that two can play at that game!"

"If I shew her that," said William menacingly, as he moved towards the door, "it will be in a way you won't like."



BOOK II

CHAPTER XX

THE BLACK HORSE INN

BETWEEN the Howe farm and Burnthorpe village, a little lane runs off abruptly by a fir plantation.

In winter it is dark and dismal, so drear indeed between the firs on the one hand and the hedgerow on the other, that timid women and even the swaggering country youth frankly admit they would rather walk a mile further along the highroad than take advantage of the short cut it gives them to the village or the Howe.

But in Spring and Summer it is greatly frequented by children and by lovers; by children, because from early Spring to late Autumn flowers of all kinds (and blackberries) bloom there in abundance unknown to any other road or path in the district; and by lovers, because its very narrowness compels that proximity of stalwart arm and buxom waist, which by the rustic swain is held more precious than the interchange of speech.

The scornful folk who are not in love or who have suffered the uneasy passion and been untimely cured by a dose of matrimony, call it mockingly "Kissing Lane"; but amongst the children it is simply known as —"Thompson's," and prosaic as the name appears, years hence it comes back to many idealised by its association with the fair and delicate wildlings that languished so often in the hot clasp of a covetous childish hand.

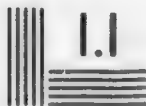


MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

ANSI and ISO TEST CHART No. 2



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APPLIED IMAGE

Of Thompson himself and Thompson's house, the "Black Horse," at the end of the lane, both children and lovers recked little, except to avoid his cows who grazed in the pasture and one of which — with horns mysteriously swathed in dirty rags — was said to give chase to trespassers; or to hide themselves in the far recesses of the wood, when across its spaces, blue and hazy with wild bracken, they heard Thompson's whistle or the barking of his dog.

So much for the innocents and those, who for a brief while walk in bliss apart; but for the ordinary wayfarer Thompson had another interest if of a baser sort. Thompson's beer was good; Thompson's daughters (there were four of them), pretty, and moreover to reach on winter nights the haven of Thompson's bar parlour, it was not necessary to brave the solitude of Thompson's lane. For the "Black Horse" (happily for trade at Thompson's and what Mrs. Thompson styled a "God-be-thanked job") though he had his tail in the lane, turned his head to the old Roman thoroughfare, that linked Burnthorpe with the towns beyond it and the greater world out of sight, so that Thompson was not only said to thrive but to have already saved a mint of money.

On this June evening of which I write William Topham, who was termed George Hall (people had dropped the mister as a tag incongruous to the somewhat nomadic and apparently — in George's case — profitless career of sheep and cattle dealer) at the "Black Horse" about some time, had chosen to go there by the lane, partly to avoid the vigilance of his sister and possibly also for reasons that are said in Spring to sway a young man's fancy.

At one time previous to the beginning of this history the landlord of the "Black Horse" had been a loser in

a lawsuit, that had been conducted against him by Mr. Topham; and on William's first coming to the Howe relations between the Inn and the Farm had been in consequence somewhat strained. That this—as far as William was concerned—had passed, might be seen by the way he loitered in the lane with the air of one well acquainted and on friendly terms with all about the place.

He was leaning now against the pasture gate, watching two of the Misses Thompson, who were busy at their milking in the fields; and as he watched he chewed in country fashion a sprig of stichwort he had gathered from the hedge.

It is nearly six years since we saw William sidling to Marion's side upon the sofa in old Mrs. Topham's dining-room, and six years have wrought their change. The Thompson girls call to him saucily that his glum looks will turn their milk sour, and William answers nothing but eyes them boldly, looking them up and down from the shining can held in the curve of their knees beneath the animal's udder to the pink forehead pressed against its flank.

Not so had William ever dared to look at Marion; not even so had he ventured to study and apprise those subtly-scented divinities who had taught him in his student days in London something of the shames and mysteries of sex; but Marion rejecting him, Marion rebuffing him without excuse to her family's indignation and her own hurt pride,—this for William had torn the veil from the shrine and proved it—what most shrines are where no faith is—a mockery of divinity.

When the girls had finished their milking, they came with their full pails slowly towards the gate, which William half churlishly held open for them.

"Well, William," the younger said saucily, "going along home with us?"

He nodded, falling into pace with them but not offering to relieve them of their cans.

The younger sister twitted him again.

"Come, William, thy arms 'ud frame better at carrying these than our'n do."

"Whist, Becky," her sister said reprovingly. "What ever would mother say if she heard you talk so free to Mr. William?"

"Oh, that's all right," the other retorted, laughing. "Me an' William be old friends. But for all that he don't seem over eager to take the pail."

William threw his stichwort away and looked down at the strained brown arms.

"Yours seem to frame as well as mine would," he said sulkily.

The young woman accepted the speech as a compliment and laughed heartily.

"If Nannie had been here," she said with a shy glance at her sister, "thou wouldst have told her another tale, eh, William?"

"I am not fond of doing other people's work for them," replied William. "I've had my share of that and more." He was thinking of his apprenticeship to his father at the Howe and spoke wrathfully. It had become an old and ever ready grievance with him, that did not suffer from lack of airing. Like another Jacob he had served faithfully for Rachel and had not even got a Leah.

"But the Howe's all thine now, isn't it?" asked the other girl.

"You'd better ask my father that," said William curtly. "All I know is he comes as often and interferes just as much."

"Thou shouldst get wed, William," jibed Becky.
"Maybe a wife would protect thee."

They had reached the "Black Horse." Outside on the stone bench at the back door, used generally for the milk pails to stand and sweeten upon, George Fall was sitting with a half-drained glass of ale balanced on the cobbles between his feet. In front of him, her arms a-kinbo stood Deborah, the eldest of old Thompson's daughters. She was a tall, well-made woman, endowed like her sisters with a certain bold comeliness though a family tendency to grow stout in the body and red in the face was already apparent; and it had been more than once reported by village gossip that George Fall was courting her.

She might have been answering a proposal from him now for, as the others approached, her loud voice reached them distinctly.

"Nay, nay, thou need say no more, George, I'll have no dealings wi' a wastrel."

The two girls disappeared with their cans into the dairy as Deborah turned to William.

"You look warm, Master William," she said politely. "Better step inside and have a crack¹ with mother. She'll be main proud to see thee an' you'll find it cooler there."

As William hesitated, George Fall rose and brought his heavy hand down upon his shoulder.

"Come," he said, "let's both go."

"Trust them as is not invited to invite theirsels," said Miss Deborah ironically, as she led the way.

The parlour was on the side opposite the Public Bar. If any decent wayfarers chanced to call at the "Black Horse" for tea, they were always shown there; or if a stray fisherman or any of the gentlemen, shooting the

¹ A talk.

partridge covers near, came to refresh themselves on bread and cheese and ale, it was served them in the parlour; and there too on winter evenings the Misses Thompson entertained their young men, taking private séances in turn and keeping to them rigorously.

It was very clean with a superabundance of mats upon the polished table and of antimacassars upon the chairs. Over the mantelpiece was a monster pike in a glass case and above the door a case of birds, that old Thompson had bought from the Howe sale; the only picture was an ancient painting of a Derby winner in a black frame, which time and generations of flies had rendered more and more obscure. Contrary to her daughter's expectations Mrs. Thompson was not there; though sitting on the broad window seat with some sewing in her lap and a newspaper beside her was the youngest of the sisters, Nannie. As she rose at their entrance one could see at a glance that Nannie was not like the other girls. Deb and Becky and Zip hadn't an ounce of shyness between them, whilst Nannie was already blushing and lowering her eyes. Even as a child she had differed greatly from her sisters. They had all been strong; she weakly. They had loved boisterous play; she to sit in some quiet corner alone with her doll. Her very delicacy had given her a refinement that they entirely lacked. Theirs was the freshness and rank sweetness of the wild hyacinths, that grew in the wood behind their house: hers the sensitive grace of a wood anemone that too rough a touch might kill. Miss Lightfoot, who after her marriage gave her music lessons, used to talk with rare enthusiasm of her sweet and gentle temper. William instinctively raised his straw hat, whilst George Fall bent clumsily to pick up a reel she had dropped.

"You set yourself over yonder," said Miss Deborah, giving her swain a push that landed him into the one arm-chair in the room. "Let my sister pick up her own reels. She is quite capable." William sat down upon the sofa. The sofa was nearest to the window where Nannie had reseated herself and was making a pretence of sewing, her head bent. Miss Deborah glanced from them to Mr. George and winked meaningly.

"And now, you young gentleman," she said jocularly,—and with an emphasis upon the "young" that made Mr. George pass his hand thoughtfully over the bald part of his head,—“What can I serve you?”

She went over to the Bar and her mother came in,—a lady, who was a ripe presentment of her elder daughter, except that she had lived long enough to tag a moral to the tragi-comedy of life. "Good-evening, Mr. Tall," she said briskly. "Good-evening, Master William, I am pleased to see you, sir. I was only saying to my husband this morning, that never have I seen the Howe meadows promise such a crop of hay for long enough."

"William gets all the luck, dang it," said Mr. George.

"Well, an' he deserves it," replied Mrs. Thompson. "Look how he have worked, the poor dear. An' almost for nothing as you might say. To be sure what a man addles that he deserves."

"Now, mother, mother," said Miss Deborah, entering with a tray of glasses.

"You ladies must have something to keep us company," gallantly suggested Mr. George; "I'll treat the missus and Miss Deb"—he leered across at William.

"Not for me, thank you all the same, mister," said Mrs. Thompson.

"I will, though," said Deborah, "this sort o' weather makes a body dry."

William said something in a low tone to Nannie, who shook her head.

"She only needs a bit of pressing, sir," volunteered her parent. "Lemonade's what she's most partial to."

Nannie's blush owned the impeachment. The next minute she was sipping daintily from the foaming glass William put into her hand.

"And what's this grand news about your cousin, Mr. William?" asked Mrs. Thompson, "Lady Winterfield?"

"Marion Oliver, do you mean," replied William and his face had whitened perceptibly. "You must ask others about her. I know nothing."

Nannie put down her empty glass. Her eyes were bright.

"Why," she said excitedly, "she's been presented at Court. There's all about it in the *Yorkshire Herald*. Wouldn't you like to see it?"

"I don't want to see it," said William shortly.

"That's sensible," said Mrs. Thompson approvingly. "For as I tell my girls, to be sure it's naught but vanity and vexation of spirit after all."

"But you ought to," said Nannie to William. "Her dress must have been grand — maize-coloured satin and a train all embroidered over with golden wheatears."

"Fine feathers makes fine birds," observed her mother oracularly. "To be sure she was always a proud piece, was Miss Marion,— and a knowing one, too, to catch an old man like yon with one foot in the grave. My word, but it's been a grand lift-up for the Olivers."

"But she was pretty and nice too," said Nannie. And she appealed to William. "Wasn't she?"

"And what is prettiness?" said Mrs. Thompson. "A thing that fades to-day and is gone to-morrow. And if she was nice — well, I for one never saw it."

"Oh, mother," said Nannie reproachfully. "Don't you remember how kind she always asked after you that time you was ill and she used to come here along with the Doctor?"

"Well, an' what did it cost her?" asked Mrs. Thompson ungraciously,— "No more'n than the words out of her mouth, to be sure."

"She brought you flowers one day."

"Aye, I remember, a bit o' honeysuckle and a rose or two she had plucked from the hedge as they come along. There's no great merit in that — is there? Besides I ain't one that sets any store by flowers. They mostly has a stink, it seems to me, an' they all withers sooner or later."

It was curious to notice how she always opposed Nannie in this discussion about Marion; and how as it were she roused the girl to champion her idol, whilst all the time her shrewd regard never missed a change on William's face.

"Now the one I do like," said she heartily, "be Miss Annie. To be sure she have a pleasant taking way with her, that lass."

"But she isn't pretty like Miss Marion," objected Nannie; "when people are pretty like that they have a right to be proud." She appealed again to William.

"Perhaps," he said curtly.

Her mother laughed good-naturedly.

"Well, I'll leave it," she said, "if folk haven't a right to much, they have to their own thoughts, for to be sure they're all we shall take away with 's."

She left the room. Deborah and George were absorbed in some jest of their own. Under cover of their voices William turned to Nannie.

"Did you really like Marion Oliver?"

"Yes."

"So did I once."

"I know you did," she said. Her pretty eyes — blue as speedwells — met his. They told him with innocent candour that, had she been Marion, not for all the lords in Christendom would she have given up her William.

Miss Deborah broke the spell.

"I thought you two were going to do a deal in sheep," she said.

"So we are," said Mr. George coarsely. "In ewes, seemingly."

Nannie threw down her work and ran from the room. Miss Deborah followed her.

"Let's go outside," said William irritably. "This room is stifling."

Nannie in her hurried exit had dropped the *Herald* upon the floor, and William, as he strode away, perhaps not unconsciously, trampled upon it with his heavy boot.

As Nannie passed the kitchen door on her way to the stairs, Becky called out to her.

"Come an' hear your fortune, Nan."

"I can tell you Nannie's fortune," said their mother, "an' it will be better than yours."

"How do you know?" retorted Becky. "It mightn't be a bed of roses being Mrs. William Topham."

CHAPTER XXI

THE SUMMIT

ON a certain July evening Mr. Topham walked in his garden. It had been a close, hot, somewhat garish day: but as the sun declined, a pleasant coolness had fallen like a mantle of refreshment over the jaded earth. In Mr. Topham's garden the effect was delightful. Flowers, that had drooped in the heat, lifted their heads and gave forth their fragrance liberally, until the cool, moist air was all perfumed and sensuous.

Mr. Topham was proud of his garden. In all Burnthorpe there were no ribbon borders like unto his: no other roses did as well: no lawns were so green nor so closely shaven: even the grounds at the Hall could not be said — except in extent — to excel Mr. Topham's garden though the two had often been compared as well-matched rivals.

Mr. Topham walked with his hands clasped behind him, his chest well squared, a portly waistcoat of white nankeen somewhat visible. His look was one of entire satisfaction with himself and the world in general: and when one can look back, as Mr. Topham was looking back that evening, upon a success so complete as his,—wealth and position and esteem won by one's own dogged and undaunted effort,—there is surely some excuse for the pride, which seemed to twinkle in each individual button of that same comfortably proportioned nankeen.

And yet the amber was not entirely without its flies.

There were secret uneasinesses about William, who had seemed inclined of late years to flout somewhat

shamelessly his father's notions of a decorous respectability; there was Henry forced against his will into the parental calling for which he shewed neither liking nor so far much ability; and there was Marion Oliver's marriage which had irked the lawyer not a little.

Marion had jilted his son. He had wanted to see her humiliated. And, behold, Marion risen like a phoenix before the wondering eyes of her native place, poor little Mrs. Oliver become suddenly important, and the homage of Burnthorpe — till then exclusively devoted to Mr. Topham — torn and rent in the effort to extend it equally to the connexions by marriage of a peer.

The situation with all its attendant comicalities amused Eleanor Topham, but it irritated her husband; although Marion's marriage had been made the occasion of a reconciliation between the families, and the lawyer's wedding present to his niece had been a cheque that had looked well in the papers.

But it was not of these things that the lawyer was thinking upon this August evening. If William got any worse — Mr. Topham knew nothing of Nannie — there was always Australia for ne'er-do-wells; as to Henry — Mr. Topham had the whip-hand over Henry, who would find, if he valued that upon which he had set his heart, submission to his father would pay him best in the end; and when all was said and done, the Olivers had gained little from Marion's marriage except an unsubstantial kind of glory reflected from afar.

No, the lawyer's thoughts were pleasantly busied with himself; with the invitation to dine at the Hall that had come for himself and his wife and which came frequently to them though rarely to anyone else in Burnthorpe; with the town-Clerkship of Bishopton, a post he had long coveted and which had been at last awarded him; and lastly with Belmont — that solid

substantiation of what had been perhaps Mr. Topham's only ideal.

And as the lawyer, reaching the summer-house at the top of the garden, turned around, Belmont was indeed pleasant to look back upon. Well built, with both as the architect had assured him—"elegance and propriety in its design"; the ivy covering its walls, that had looked so ugly that winter's day that Mary Ann had seen them first; and on the side where the shuttered windows of the drawing-room opened upon the lawn, a gloire de Dijon rose in full bloom, that reached to the gable above and twined about the bedroom windows,—there was about Belmont a maturity, an air of permanence that spoke gratefully to the man, who had no other thought than that here he should fulfill his days in honour and prosperity.

Mrs. Topham was inside the summer-house, a white apron covering her brown silk dress, stringing currants, that Mary Ann had just brought her from the kitchen garden, into an earthenware bowl upon the rustic table.

She looked up as her husband's portly figure blocked the narrow entrance and, drawing aside her ample skirts, made room for him beside her on the bench with a kindly air of welcome.

"Why can't Mary Ann or one of the girls do those things?" asked Mr. Topham, as he watched his wife's stained plump fingers move briskly at their work.

"Because I like doing it, love," said Mrs. Topham gently. "It is better for me than sitting idle. It takes," she sighed involuntarily,—“it takes one's thoughts off.”

The lawyer grunted. It was against his notions of what was befitting the dignity of Topham, that his wife should now-a-days ever do anything that one of her servants might do instead.

He had a notion that fancy-work and idleness were the only suitable occupations for fine ladies — at least of the sedater sort — and he had more than once recommended both to his wife.

But Mrs. Topham — plastic, gentle soul though she ordinarily was, — was firm on one point. She would not alter nor aggrandise by one particular the ordinary course of life that had been theirs for so many years: nor desist from her quiet household duties.

Mr. Topham would have bought her a victoria: Mrs. Topham clung to the old pony and the old-fashioned chaise, in which Mary Ann was able to drive her about with so much comfort to them both.

Mr. Topham would have dined late: not because he preferred it but because he thought it would look well. Mrs. Topham stuck to the midday meal, which, except at the Hall, was universal in Burnthorpe. Mr. Topham would have increased as much as possible the parade of outside ostentation: Mrs. Topham, knowing what hollowness underlay it all, preferred at any rate the primary conditions.

It was as characteristic to-day of Belmont as it had been in the beginning of this story, that not one of the gorgeously bound books in Mr. Topham's book-shelves had ever yet been handled by any member of his family. Henry, who had inherited his mother's taste for reading, would often stand and look longingly in at those glass doors: but even Henry in his wildest moments of rebellion had not dared in this instance to break his father's rule.

Even as Mr. Topham looked out now from the summer house, his face contracted in an ominous frown.

"That boy," said the lawyer, in answer to his wife's exclamation, — "look at him."

Mrs. Topham looked. Henry had crossed the lawn

in front of the drawing-room windows, and, having gained the main path, was coming towards them in happy unconsciousness of offence.

"Henry," shouted Mr. Topham, as soon as he was within hearing, "you were walking on the grass."

"Yes," said Henry. He had reached them now and stood in the rustic frame-work of the porch,—a tall, well-knit figure of a youth with a bright open face that was like his mother's. And Mrs. Topham looked at him over her basket of currants with motherly pride written in every line of her comely features.

"Then don't do it again," said Henry's sire wrathfully.

"We must not play tennis nor croquet on the lawn," said Henry, not uncivilly but with a sort of good-natured protest, "I did not know we could not walk upon it."

"My lawns are not to be walked upon," said Mr. Topham.

"I see," said Henry. He had glanced involuntarily at his mother; but she had bowed her head again and did not look up.

So Henry passed on his way.

"Where is he going?" asked his father sharply.

"To the Olivers, I expect," said Mrs. Topham; and added with a haste that seemed somehow irrelevant, "Tom's at home, you know."

"Oh, is he?" replied Mr. Topham grimly. "You can't hoodwink me, Mrs. Topham. It's Annie, not Tom the young fool's gone to see."

Mrs. Topham trembled — his father had a way of pouncing upon Henry's pleasures just as a cat springs at last upon the mouse free but within its grasp. But she spoke up fearlessly,—

"And if it is Annie, John, there is no objection, is

there? She is a nice girl and has a great influence for good upon Henry."

"They are a couple of young fools," said the lawyer gruffly. "How old are they?"

"Henry is nearly nineteen, Annie is twenty."

Mr. Topham grunted.

"You won't interfere, John," his wife said wistfully. "She makes up to him for so much, poor boy."

"Oh, you may have it your own way," said Mr. Topham, "but I know what will happen. She will treat him as that other hussy treated William."

"I am sure she will not," said Mrs. Topham. "The girls are absolutely unlike. William,"—she spoke as if she were pleading for him,—"*loved* Marion and has felt and suffered on her account terribly. But I see now that theirs could have never been a happy marriage. I wonder I did not see it then."

"See what?"

"That she was not suitable," replied Mrs. Topham quietly. "Marion was beautiful then. She was—if we had only had the sense to see it—ambitious then. Old Lady Metcalfe tells me she has risen to her new position as if she had been born to it. She is wonderful. Such a woman could not have been happy herself at the Howe nor have made William happy."

"She has ruined him, the —" his wife's touch upon his arm cut short a name, that was to say the least of it opprobrious.

"William may pull himself together yet, love," said Mrs. Topham hopefully. "Only have patience."

Mr. Topham looked at his watch and got up. There was a meeting in the town at eight at which he was to take the chair. "Well, I must be going," he said, and added with a real affection and concern for his wife, that

prevailed over his former roughness of manner,—
“Don’t stay too long and catch cold, Eleanor, we don’t want you laid up.”

His wife watched him as he walked down the path,—the broad back, the rugged head set rather low upon the short bull-like neck but held arrogantly erect, the pompous gait; and when at last he was out of sight, she resumed her occupation with fingers that trembled and a prayer upon her lips.

It always seemed to Eleanor Topham that her husband—with a blind fatuity amazing in one whose business instincts were at once so unerring and so keen,—had wilfully overlooked all those things, that in this life are of any real value: upon things temporal, upon pride, vainglory and the like—things that not only perish with us but often before us, the lawyer had pinned his whole ambition.

His three children had more fear than affection for him: William lived in a state of sullen defiance: Mary was secretly undutiful and disobedient; only his own sunny temper and her influence prevented what threatened to be incessant warfare between Henry and his father.

And only now—at the height of his success—was Mr. Topham beginning to realise all that that success had cost him; and dim and fleeting intuitions of what might have been the relations between himself and his children stirred the great man uneasily. At times he complained bitterly of their ingratitude, at others it was pitiable to Mrs. Topham to see how Henry would shrink with even more embarrassment from his father’s attempts at jocularities than from his constant fault-finding.

Mary Ann’s appearance stayed her thoughts.

"Please, mam, there's Master William coming up the garden. I'd best side¹ these things."

She set to work as she spoke in deft, brisk fashion: and Mrs. Topham watched her with an affectionate smile. Mary Ann was still the faithful servant. Lovers of late years she had had in plenty; for many a decent working man come to discretion and with a little money laid by had cast sheep's eyes of longing upon "Topham's Mary." But Mary Ann was obdurate. She would none of them. And when Mrs. Topham more from a sense of duty in the matter and a certain feminine sympathy for a love affair than any inclination of her own, had pleaded the cause of the hapless swains, Mary Ann had had but one answer.

"If they was to offer me the whole world, I wouldn't have a little finger of one of them."

She had already disappeared with the empty baskets and bowl of picked currants when William came.

He approached slowly as if reluctant: and where Henry had infused a certain youthful brightness, William impressed one with a sense of gloom. There was a something sombre almost menacing about William Topham, a something forlorn too — and this is probably what had so touched the sensitive imagination of old Thompson's youngest daughter — as if the man were ever conscious of his broken purposes and a life through no fault of his own hopelessly twisted.

"Mary told me you wanted to see me," he said, as his mother kissed him.

Miss Topham had indeed been over hot-foot that morning from the Howe to tell her mother of what she had discovered about her brother's visits to the "Black Horse" and the girl (Mrs. Topham's epithet for her

¹ Side — *apicé* — "put away."

would have slipped better from her father's tongue than from a woman's) who decoyed him there.

She would have told her father also; but Mrs. Topham had first begged then entreated that nothing should be said until she herself had first seen William. And for a wonder Miss Topham had—though reluctantly—yielded to her mother's wish.

Mrs. Topham hesitated. Had it been Henry not William, words would have come easily enough: now it needed all the thought of Mr. Topham's displeasure to free her tongue.

"William," said Mrs. Topham, "Mary has been telling me—"

"And what has Mary been telling you?" interrupted William Topham wrathfully. "I thought she was up to mischief when I saw her in such a fuss to get home this morning."

"Mary spoke from a sense of duty," said Mrs. Topham hurriedly but feebly.

"Oh, did she?" said William grimly. "Well, out with it, mother; what had she to say? Was it about George Fall?"

Mrs. Topham shook her head.

"No," she said. "Although, William, I do wish, for your own sake, you would see less of that man."

"And turn my back on another unfortunate?" exclaimed William. "Not I."

"It was about a girl," said Mrs. Topham, going to the point at last,— "one of Thompson's daughters at the Black Horse."

"And what has Mary to say about her?" asked William, ceasing the impatient tap of his riding whip against his legged calves.

"There is nothing dishonorable between you and

this girl,— is there, William?" slowly said Mrs. Topham.

"If Mary told you that," said William, "she told you a damned lie. She — whatever she is — she is not that sort."

Mrs. Topham breathed with perceptible relief: so much of the grosser elements of life had Miss Topham infused into Nannie's idyll.

She tried to see William's face; but it was dusk now and she could detect only the blurred outline.

"There is no-one your father dislikes more than Thompson of the 'Black Horse,' William."

William laughed boisterously.

"And when you have said that there is no-one Thompson dislikes more than my father, you have said all there is to be said."

Mrs. Topham winced perceptibly.

"You are not engaged to her, William, are you?"

"No, I am not engaged," said William, "though for the matter of that if ever I wanted to marry — and I swear I will some day, if it is only to be rid of Mary — she would be as good as any other."

"But think of her position, William. Surely she is no wife for you when you might —"

"Have had Marion Oliver were you going to say?" William laughed harshly. "No thanks, mother, not another of that sort for me."

Mrs. Topham moved her plump hands nervously in her lap.

"I am afraid I have done no good, William," she said.

"I don't know," said William more mildly. "I'll think over what you have said. But she's not the girl Mary's made you think. Don't imagine that."

"Tell me what she is, William," his mother said gently and half smiling.

"I'll tell you this," said William Topham sullenly. "Publican's daughter though she is, she's too good for me."

There was a perceptible silence in the summer-house, a silence that for William Topham must have held its memories at least and for his mother,—who knows what upspringing of a sudden hope? The next minute Henry broke in upon them.

"Hallo," he said, "what are you two doing? Mother, it's too cold for you."

"We were just going," said Mrs. Topham, rising to her feet. Her sons fell into place beside her; but it was Henry who gave her his arm.

"Where have you been?" William said to the latter.

"To see Annie," said Mrs. Topham mischievously.

Henry blushed ingenuously, then laughed merrily at some recollection.

"By Jove," he said, "Aunt Sarah's too funny. She wants Nunkey to go in for a brougham. 'No, thank you,' says Nunkey, 'the gig will last me my time, missus.' 'Oh, don't call me missus, James,' says aunt, 'it sounds so rustic. There's no ton about it.' Little Maggie asked her what 'ton' was? 'You'll know, dear,' says Aunt Sarah—'when you come out.' 'But I go out every day,' says Maggie."

Mrs. Topham's answering smile had no malice in it. Sarah's airs and graces touched as well as amused her; but she never resented them nor made a jest of the poor puffed-up little woman as did her husband.

William had laughed but mirthlessly.

"It seems to me," he said irritably, "you can go nowhere without hearing directly or indirectly of this

match of Marion Oliver's. How long has she been married now?"

"Two years," said his mother. She had slipped her other hand through his arm as she spoke.

"Annie says," began Henry, who was a born gossip, "she doesn't know how she could. He is older than Mrs. Ryder and she is your age, mater."

"Good Lord!" said William.

They had reached the house.

"You will stay to supper, William?" said his mother.

"The governor has gone to the Bank," volunteered Henry, "I met him in the Square just now."

But William refused.

His mother kissed him and whispered something in his ear.

"Oh, as to that," he said aloud, "I'll tell him when it's time. You keep out of it, mother."

Henry and his mother passed into the dining-room.

"And what was Annie doing?" asked Mrs. Topham, as she cut a goodly helping of rabbit pie.

"Mending stockings," said Henry, and added irrelevantly. "She thinks I had better cave in to the governor about the office."

"Does she?"

"I think I will as she wishes it," said Henry, trying to speak carelessly, "though I do hate it."

"I am glad Annie advises you so wisely," said Mrs. Topham.

And just as in his careless childhood he had so often beaten her upon the breast in his impetuous notion to be free: so now he talked of Annie and all she bade him do—his mother's precepts but unheeded till they fell from Annie's lips—never thinking that he hurt her, so brave the kindly smile that met his young enthusiasm.

"If only," went on Henry through mouthfuls of cold rabbit, "the governor would give a fellow his head a bit and let him have some decent amusement, it wouldn't be so bad."

Mrs. Topham sighed. The days when the half frightened child had played his noiseless games behind his mother's chair, were still not so far off.

"If it were not for Annie," said Henry, "I'd feel inclined sometimes to cut the whole show."

"Henry," his mother said reproachfully.

With a sudden change to demonstrative affection, he alone of her three children ever showed her, Henry stooped and kissed her. "Poor mum," he said. "She can't bear to hear a word against the pater."

CHAPTER XXII

THE SHEEP FAIR

"You see," said Miss Topham, "you would have done better to let me tell papa. William says he's going to marry Nannie Thompson as soon as the Fairs are over."

Miss Topham had walked over from the Howe to have tea at the Bank with Elsie Webb. Between herself and Elsie — still alas, unmarried, though the shirts she occasionally presented to the Burnthorpe Dorcas were as perfect in their way as shirts could be — there existed one of those friendships of dissimilars which are a puzzle to the psychologist.

Miss Topham had started a little early. To fill up the time before she was due in the æsthetic apartment Miss Webb called her "bower" she had turned in at the Belmont gates and had unceremoniously roused poor Mrs. Topham, who was enjoying an after-dinner nap over the breakfast-room fire.

In Mr. Topham's house there was a definite season for ending and beginning fires: and one lit before the middle of September — unless there were visitors in the house when for the look of the thing a fire might be considered permissible — savoured of offence, as his wife was well aware. But Mr. Topham was at Bishopton: and the fire had been lit under protest as it were — feeble protest from Mrs. Topham, who felt chilly — and strong persuasion from Mary Ann.

Mary, who quite approved her father's parsimony in private life, emphasized her disapproval by withdrawing her chair as far as possible from the offending

hearth and creating an unpleasant draught by violently fanning herself with the newspaper Mrs. Topham had been reading before she fell asleep.

Mrs. Topham sat up. It took her a little time to recollect her thoughts and to realise what her daughter was talking about. Then she smiled.

"I believe you knew all the time," said Miss Topham.

"Really, Mary," said Mrs. Topham.

"I only hope you will look as pleased when you have seen her," continued Miss Topham emphatically. "In my opinion, it's a disgrace."

"But, Mary," protested her mother.

"Papa's bound to get to know at the Fairs to-morrow," continued Miss Topham remorselessly. "I wonder what *he* will say?"

"If you will let me explain," said Mrs. Topham, "I knew nothing at all about this — this engagement. The last time I saw William was the night —" Mrs. Topham made a mental calculation somewhat after Mrs. Oliver's fashion, "Mary Ann and I picked the last of the red currants. I have not seen him since. What you tell me is quite new to me."

"Well, it's true anyway," said Miss Mary. "He told me so himself."

She might have added the information that she and William had wrangled rather seriously that morning — hence the information — but refrained.

"You should have let me tell papa when I wanted to," she said. "He would soon have put a stop to it."

"And if he had not been able to put what you call a 'stop' to it, Mary. What then? You forget that William is no longer under his father's authority."

"There will be fine ructions anyway," said Miss Topham, "I wouldn't be in William's shoes."

She glanced at the clock. Elsie would not have yet

completed the mysteries of a toilet, that was carried out on lines strictly æsthetic and which needed more pins to hold draperies together than Miss Topham herself would require in a year.

"I know another thing," said Miss Topham, as her mother did not speak,— "that stupid Henry is in love with Annie Oliver."

"We know he is," said Mrs. Topham, with a faint triumphant intonation upon the pronoun.

"They're very silly," said Miss Topham. "In fact in children like that, I call it disgusting."

"Do you?" said Mrs. Topham, not without amusement.

Miss Topham changed the subject.

"Is it true that the new Curate is going to lodge with Mallaby?"

"I believe so."

"I don't know why the Vicar wants a Curate. It's very lazy of him."

"He is an old man, Mary," said her mother.

"To think of Mallaby," continued Miss Topham, whose grievances against the world in general seemed to culminate in a sense of almost personal injury against her grandmother's late attendant, "being able to rent grandma's house and then making such a fuss at the funeral. It was disgraceful."

"I suppose she had saved from her wages," said Mrs. Topham, to whom the remembrance of poor old Mrs. Topham's obsequies was not a pleasant one. "At any rate it is no business of ours."

Miss Topham rose from her chair, laid the newspaper upon the table and moved towards the door.

With her fingers upon the handle she turned.

"As I came over the bridge," she began in a way faintly reminiscent of the Seven Wives of St. Ives,

"I saw Henry going off fishing with Tom Oliver. I wonder if papa knows."

"Papa's at Bishopton," said Mrs. Topham indiscreetly.

"I thought as much when I saw Henry," said Miss Mary triumphantly, and having fired her final shot, she made her exit, leaving her mother looking into the fire and thinking deeply. Mrs. Topham's chances of repose had been rudely destroyed, poor lady, her thoughts plunged into a channel that promised doubt, uncertainty and turbulence.

As Miss Topham crossed the Market Place to the Bank it was evident that Burnthorpe was at the full tide of preparation for its annual Fair. Men were already busy putting up the pens: and from end to end of the long Market Place Miss Topham's sharp eyes noted the network of stack-bars with their broad alleys and narrow spaces which to-morrow would be thronged with huddled sheep.

In Burnthorpe the very youngest child is taught to look forward to the Fairs and carries their image with him into the long years: they have a something that is indisseverable from one's remembrance of the place, each year they mark a period, and old inhabitants make them their reckoning point from which to calculate the dates of births and deaths and marriages, just as Mrs. Oliver tallied the chronology of her small domestic happenings with the births of her many children.

There are months in the year in which I never think of Burnthorpe, days and weeks in which my recollection of it lies hidden in my heart like some forgotten picture in a lumber-room: but so surely as the season for the Fairs comes round — the "back-end" folk describe it there — and I see the stubble of the garnered fields, or smell the reek of garden bonfires, or hear through

the Autumn quiet an apple in the orchard fall with a thud amid the grass, then, lo, a magic bridge spans for me time and space and I am back at Burnthorpe, the little town upon the hill, whose memory will only die with mine, though I myself no longer am remembered there. I am a child again and with my little stick in hand (no child that I wot of was ever without a stick at Fair-time) I am a-foot about the bleak streets and grey Market Place, watching the men swing the heavy wedges as they knock in the hurdles for the pens and drinking in the din they make as if it were music in my ears. Sharing my pocket with a wind-blown apple is a little purse with sixpence in it to expend on fairings, when Third Fair Day comes round; and the thought of other sixpences that truancy may jeopardise sends me scurrying home at last through the frosty dusk and past the grey houses, whose quiet fronts hide such a bustle of pleasant preparation to go all unwillingly to bed and lie awake there listening, as on the night of which I write, did Mrs. Topham for the coming of the flocks

Mrs. Topham slept ill that night. Long after Mr. Topham had come up to bed and — in that simplicity, which in those days characterized the married life of folk even much higher in rank than Mr. and Mrs. Topham — had made his toilet for the night, said his prayers and wound his gold watch which always hung upon the chintz-covered tester of his bed — (Mrs. Topham used to tell her grand children, that only once in the whole course of their married life had she seen the lawyer's hand at fault over the winding of his watch) — his wife lay awake, thinking of William and his father's anger, of Henry and Henry's colt-like moods of frolic and, as one doubt after another tossed and

turned in her head, Mrs. Topham folded her hands and prayed in silence.

Powerless prayers perhaps, but who shall despise them, these mother's prayers, wrung as they are from fond hearts, that since the first sharp birth-pangs to the day that their pleading lips are forever sealed, cease not to suffer and to intercede for their wayward children?

And just as she might have dozed a little in the early morning hours, the passing of the sheep roused her as they did the expectant children, fallen asleep reluctantly and tardily awaking.

They came at first like the sound of rain pattering; then one heard the tread of several animals more distinctly — the one that limped, the frightened thing that broke from the herd and ran off helplessly, the tired creature that lagged in the rear; and with it all a confusion of noise almost indescribable — the bewildered piteous bleat of the lambs, the deep-mouthed assurance of their mothers, the note of fright and anger in the raucous voice of some old ram, the yelp of the sheep-dogs, tired yet alert, the halting, shambling gait of loose-kneed men from the moorland farms, the hoarse oaths and witticisms of the Irish drovers and the shrill accompaniment of children's shouts and laughter.

Mrs. Topham lay and listened. She heard Mary Ann and her satellites begin their daily round, and Henry steal past their bedroom door full of eagerness to join the rout. Then Mary Ann brought them hot water — both the lawyer and his wife would have despised the matutinal tea in which the present generation indulge — and Mr. Topham awoke.

Both rose promptly. The lawyer had business in his

office to despatch before going into the Fair and playing the friendly host to his clients: whilst before Mrs. Topham lay a day heavy with domestic cares.

At Burnthorpe in Fair-time hospitality ruled supreme. Every house in those days had its table set, its round of cold roast beef, its jars of red cabbage pickle, its damson tarts,—they were there for all who chose to come—the stranger within the gates as well as the invited guest.

At Mr. Topham's the luncheon prepared for these fugitive visitors was one of the best: the welcome—even if it had an eye to future benefit, a mortgage or a lawsuit—one of the warmest; the very atmosphere indeed, once some embarrassed farmer had sidled past the fearsome griffins, seemed surcharged with heartiness. But to-day a cloud hung over the house of Topham. Mr. Topham, for some unknown reason his wife had not the courage to question, was mute and brooding, she herself nervous and distracted. At breakfast there was almost a scene with Henry, who was roughly warned by his father, that if he caught him loafing about the Fairs that morning with young Tom Oliver, it would be the worse for him. Henry flushed with anger and it was only his mother's piteous signals that checked an explosion.

"If William should come here," said Mr. Topham, as he rose from the table. "send him down to me at the office."

The first visitor to arrive was Miss Mary, who went straightway into the dining-room and began to criticise the damson pies, that Mary Ann was arranging on the sideboard.

"Why didn't you ask me to make the pastry, mama?" said Miss Topham, whose culinary art was a by-word among the hard-jawed farm lads at the Howel.

"I should have made it much more economically than Mary Ann. I call it wicked waste to put puff paste before vulgar farmers and people."

"Has William come?" asked Mrs. Topham nervously.

"He drove me in," said Mary, "he went straight into the Fair. It seems that old Thompson met papa in Bishopton yesterday and let out the whole thing. Hasn't papa told you?"

"No," said Mrs. Topham, "not a word."

"They had quite a scene," said Mary, herself rather awestruck. "I think it frightened William."

"The castor sugar now, Mary Ann," said Mrs. Topham, controlling herself with an effort, "and the silver cream ewers."

No wonder some of Mr. Topham's visitors opened their eyes in wordless admiration,—an admiration that carried home strange details to curious wives—at the magnificence of Mr. Topham's table. The best linen and the best china and the best silver were all in evidence on these occasions; and many an artful Yorkshireman let his fine damask napkin slide to the ground as the best means of ridding himself of a troublesome encumbrance.

As the mistress of Belmont surveyed Mary Ann's finished handiwork that day, giving a touch here and there as her custom was, the words of a certain proverb lodged largely in her mind.

The guests might enjoy their stalled ox if they would, but no dinner of herbs and hyssop could be more bitter to the owners of Belmont.

Out in the Fair, whose turmoil of sheep and drovers, of farmers, dogs and lookers-on, Henry from his desk in his father's office was watching enviously through a small hole he had scratched in the paint, that,—as you

will remember,—whitened its window nearly to the top,— Mr. Topham was already a-foot.

As he passed the Olivers' home he saw the Doctor, leaning against a hurdle, talking to some men; for with James Oliver as with his brother-in-law the Fairs were something of a field day, the bills came in better than they did at any other time of the year. The youngest little Oliver stood beside her father, poking her little stick through the pen bars at the heaving sides of the sheep that pressed against them.

The Doctor's back was bent and the coat upon it green. Mr. Topham's eyes surveyed it not without a certain sneaking approval of a man, who had refused—in spite of his daughter's marriage and his wife's flights of vanity—to alter by one jot or tittle the ordinary course of his simple hard-working life.

The Lawyer loved greetings in the Market Place; and there were many there who fed his appetite that day. He moved amongst them a well-known and respected figure, a successful man as Burnthorpe conceived success; and if in his victorious course it had been sometimes necessary to thrust others from the path, after all why blame Mr. Topham?

Behind the curtains of her dining-room,—they were new curtains by the way and the house looked freshly painted and done up—stood Mrs. Oliver, watching her brother's progress through the Fair, watching it—in spite of the easier times and the reflected glory of Marion's marriage,—with hatred in her heart and the sense of a bitter and lasting wrong.

Old Lady Metcalfe had driven down to have a look at the Fair and all the queer folk there congregated; and as the Lawyer made his slow way through the thronged alleys between the sheep-pens, her ponies going at snail's pace overtook him.

The carriage was stopped and Mr. Topham summoned.

"Aren't these sheep seductive?" said the old lady laughing. Then she rapped his arm with the handle of her lorgnette and lowered her voice. The old dandy at her side looked on with interest.

"What is this I hear about William marrying one of those forward hussies at the 'Black Horse'? Fie, fie, it is positively shocking. When he might have had that pretty Marion too. Oh, you foolish, foolish man!"

The carriage passed on and left the Lawyer standing, his conventional smile merging to a scowl, the sallow colour of his face turned to a yellowish white with purple blotches.

Not ten yards away stood William Topham and George Fall together, bargaining over a pen of Scotch lambs. Mr. Topham strode towards them and took William by the buttonhole. "Come with me," he said hoarsely.

They made their way, Mr. Topham roughly forcing a passage through the crowd conscious of nothing in his wrath but the gall that had been so heedlessly dropped into his brimming cup, William sullenly following — to the Churchyard, the only quiet spot on this day of bustle and traffic.

A little knot of tourists were walking along the path. Mr. Topham waited till they had entered the Church, then turned aside towards the Churchyard wall, where they stood screened by some yews among nameless and forgotten graves.

Then Mr. Topham turned fiercely upon William. "What is this I hear — yesterday from Thompson himself, this morning from Lady Metcalfe — about you and one of his daughters?"

William had always been afraid of his father, from force of habit he momentarily cringed now.

"It's your own fault," he said, almost in a whimper, "I warned you what would happen if you came between Marion and me."

"Give her up."

A look of mulish obstinacy chased the craven from the young man's face.

"No," he said doggedly, "it's too late. We are to be married in three weeks."

"It's an insult," said Mr. Topham furiously, "it's an insult — an insult to me — to your family, sir."

William was silent.

"Come," his father said more mildly, "be sensible, give her up."

"We shall be married three weeks on Saturday," repeated William obstinately.

"In that case," said Mr. Topham, "you have spoken your last word with me. Remember that, sir."

Something in his father's bearing struck the sense of ridiculous in William Topham: he tittered like a girl.

"Do you hear?" the lawyer said passionately. "If you come near Belmont again, I'll kick you out."

It was not until evening that Mr. Topham saw his family alone. Mary, ready dressed, came into the breakfast-room where he was sitting with her mother.

"I wonder," she said fretfully, "when William's coming? It's getting late."

"Take off your things and stay where you are," Mr. Topham said furiously. "William will not come here nor will you or your mother with my consent go again to the Howe."

And Mrs. Topham, knowing now the worst, put up her hands to hide her trembling lips.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE THIRD FAIR DAY

NEVER did Mrs. Topham forget those three days of the Fair. The annual boast that these Fairs exceeded any other Fairs did on this occasion seem to justify itself; and people came and went up the Belmont drive between the laurels in a ceaseless stream, eating their cut of the joint and their fill of the damson pie; and, sometimes at going, sometimes at coming, tending a pity for the news about William, that to a sensitive nature had a something almost offensive in its familiarity. There is no leveller like trouble, and when the disaster has about it something of social stigma, the mask of sympathy often ill conceals a smirking satisfaction. So at least it seemed to Mrs. Topham, when some burly farmer, reeking of the whiskey with which he had cemented a bargain, gripped her by the hand and dropped the "mam," that had been wont to grace his tongue in former years.

Even Mr. Topham, tougher-hided though he was, felt there was a subtle difference in the salutations that he loved; and when by six o'clock on the second day the sheep had been driven to the hoims and meadows outside the town, and gigs and carts had rattled out of it towards their different destinations, the lawyer had put himself up in the Belmont breakfast-room and had bidden Mary Ann say "Not at home."

Mrs. Topham, when her directions in the kitchen had been given for the morrow, came and joined him there; and together they sat, one on each side of the fireless grate in a silence and constraint that Mrs. Topham,

glancing covertly at her husband's sullen brooding face, did not attempt to break.

Even Henry felt the cloud upon the house and stole away dejectedly to his tryst with Annie Oliver at her father's field-gate. She was waiting for him there, almost hidden in the mist that had stolen over the fields and through which the audible browsing of the sheep came muffled.

Annie Oliver was no beauty but, as she stood there by the gate, her pale face and grave eyes framed by the woollen wrap she had thrown over her head, Henry, like any other youth that's worth his salt, thought no swan finer than his goose.

She could not stay long, she told him as he held her hand. Mrs. Oliver, distracted by the noise of the Fair had retired to bed with a ladylike headache; and there were the children to put to bed and the Doctor's supper to cook. But she lingered long enough to hear about the upset at Belmont; and her "Poor Aunt Eleanor" seemed to knot another link in the bond of mutual associations and sympathy that existed between them.

Henry held her in his arms a moment,—as winning a mistress despite her demureness as ever nestled in a lover's embrace; the next he was listening to her retreating footsteps down the gravelled road between the garden fences, the bark of a dog as she passed the kennel, her quiet voice and then the mist and silence with the shadowy unreal sheep cropping unseemly about him.

By noon of the third day the sheep had gone; the pens were taken down; the travelling menagerie and the roundabouts took up their station in the Market Place; and in amongst the stalls with their strings of bright-haired dolls, their cheap toys and tins of sticky sweets about which the last wasps of the season held a belated revel, moved little bands of eager children, the younger

and more timid clinging to a father's hand or a mother's skirts; the elder ones, arrogant and boastful, blowing up blue and purple bladders that rent the air with horrid squeaks.

The three youngest Olivers, who were there under Annie's protecting wing and with a five-shilling piece in each pocket, that Marion, not forgetting the Fairs, had sent them that morning, thought it a gorgeous festival and the music of the merry-go-rounds with its long resounding whistle shrieking a triumphant finale to every giddy gallop of the wooden steeds, the most enchanting strains that would greet the ears of men. Nor had they ever in their lives met anyone so friendly as the stout presiding lady of the centre stall, who, enthroned upon an orange box, wooed them in beery accents: "Now, honeys, what can I tempt you with?"

The Oliver children indeed could hardly sleep that night as out in the Fair the music waxed louder and louder, and the horses galloped faster and faster, and the swings went higher and higher; for the Doctor's house faced the Market Place and one had only to raise the window blind to see the whole scene, dark and mysterious and inchoate for the most part; but here and there, where a flaring gas jet lit up the glowing face of some dazzled country lass coaxing her sweetheart to purchase her some gaudy trifle from the stalls, clear enough and beyond words enthralling.

Among the groups, could the watching children have distinguished them, were the three fair damsels of the "Black Horse," each with an attendant swain and all in free and easy fashion walking about together. Miss Deborah and Mr. George led the procession displaying a boisterous humour, that was well matched in both; though Miss Deborah could when she willed bring

her headstrong suitor to the right-about as well as any masterly wife of years' standing.

William and Nannie were not there; and that, when Henry whispered the tidings in her ear next morning, was Mrs. Topham's one drop of comfort.

Henry, greatly daring, had played truant that night, and it might have gone ill with him had not Mr. Topham been too absorbed in his meditations upon William's rebellion to notice his absence from the supper table.

First he must needs take Annie Oliver into the Fair and buy at one of the booths a fairing for her of her choosing—two tiny local views, they were, in gilt frames with blue ribbon bows to attach them to the wall. Not many years afterwards they were hung—their frames tarnished, the ribbon faded—upon the rough planking of a Canadian shanty, and hanging there sometimes brought hasty tears to the homesick eyes that turned to look upon them.

And after Annie had gone in, Tom and he amused themselves—as young blood will amuse itself—till the Church clock striking twelve put a stop to all the racket.

"Mary Ann," said her mistress that night, as Mary Ann assisted her to undress, "if to-morrow is fine we will go for a drive." "To-morrow" was Mr. Topham's day at Markington; and if some thought of this had tintured the suggestion, what matron is there so innocent of matrimonial guile as to hurl the first stone?

"The pony wants to go out," concurred Mary Ann, as she handed Mrs. Topham her nightcap with its pink ribbons and white frills, that Miss Mary always declared was far too coquettish a head-gear for a matron advanced in years,—“Master was only saying yesterday that he's eating his head off.”

The next day was fine — not only fine but with a warm sun shining, that made the various excuses, plausible as they were, which Mrs. Topham had concocted in the early morning hours as reasons for a drive should the weather be doubtful, not only null and void but — happily for Mrs. Topham's ease of mind and she ever loved an open course — superfluous.

To favour her further Miss Mary said at breakfast that she had arranged to go for a walk with Elsie Webb that afternoon and would possibly return to the Bank to tea.

"To the 'Black Horse,'" said Mrs. Topham, when they had reached the bridge, and the fat pony took the familiar turning towards the Howe with alacrity.

Beneath her mantle — a handsome mantle of stamped velvet that Mr. Topham had given her only a few weeks ago — Mrs. Topham nursed upon her knee an oblong parcel. It contained a string of pearls, which she herself had worn as a girl and later laid by for William's wife, when the bride in question was Marion Oliver. They should still be for William's wife, Mrs. Topham had decided, if she found her worthy of the honour.

There was little talk by the way. Mrs. Topham sat absorbed in thought and yet not so absorbed that she forgot to smile when the children in the hedgerows, gathering blackberries into their tin cans, turned to bob a willing curtsy to the well-known figure of the lawyer's wife.

It was Becky who appeared when Mrs. Topham, a little flustered with the boldness of her adventure, knocked timidly at the open door; and for an instant at sight of the strapping damsel built on lines more attractive to men of George Fall's calibre than likely to take a woman's fancy, Mrs. Topham's heart sank.

"I am Mrs. Topham," she said feebly.

"Oh, it's not me you want to see," said Becky with characteristic familiarity, "it's our Nan. She's in the parlour, if you'll step inside."

Mrs. Topham "stepped inside." She had a vision of the Bar and kitchen on either side of the passage as she passed them,—the one with its high-backed deal benches, its sanded floor, the row of bright spittoons beneath the table: the other neat and comfortable, a dresser decked with pewter, an oak settle, a cushioned Windsor chair close to the bright hearth in which old Thompson—a queer little man with a fez-cap of mangy rabbit skins upon his grizzled red hair,—was sitting smoking a churchwarden of hookah-like length.

Becky threw open the parlour door with an air.

"A lady to see you, Nan," she said, and accompanied the word by a wink that was not seen by Mrs. Topham and slightly frowned upon by Nannie.

Nannie was standing by the table cutting out; and as Mrs. Topham, pressing forward, caught her first glimpse of her beneath Becky's squared arm, she felt a sudden sensation of relief, of admiration and of pity.

Such faces as Nannie's with its shell-like delicacy of colouring—the blue eyes looking almost black in their brilliant intensity—its ethereal loveliness, Mrs. Topham had seen many times before. Amid a group of girls upon a village green or in their places at some hamlet Church upon the Moors, Mrs. Topham had often picked them out, faces less lovely possibly than Nannie's but with that same pathetic glamour of incipient disease.

Some Mrs. Topham had seen outgrow their delicacy, become buxom matrons, mothers: other fade insensibly—their passing and their vacant places the sadness of an hour.

And as she looked from Nannie to the table littered with the evident preparation of some of the girl's modest bridal gear, a strange — considering she was William's mother — compassionate repugnance took her, that the ruder facts of life should ever come in contact with this fair and gentle creature. Nannie, too shy to speak, was all blushes and on the verge of tears.

"I am William's mother," said Mrs. Topham, "I have come to see you."

Nannie pushed a chair forward.

"Mother will be sorry," she said politely. "She's gone to Bishopton Feast with my sisters and they won't be back till evening."

Mrs. Topham was looking at the work upon the table.

"This is —?" her kindly smile put Nannie at her ease — "How beautifully you sew, my dear."

"I wanted to be a dressmaker," Nannie said, "but Dr. Oliver told mother too much sitting indoors would be the death of me."

"Aren't you strong?" asked Mrs. Topham.

"Oh yes, now," said Nannie. "That was a year ago."

Mrs. Topham was still fingering the work upon the table. The calico the girl was using was of superior quality, the trimming simple but good.

"And when is the wedding to be?" asked Mrs. Topham quietly.

"Oh, mam," said Nannie impulsively, "I know you have a right to be angry. I know quite well I am not what he should have looked for. But I will be a good wife to him. I will for" — her passion seemed to heave the frail breast, over which in her unconscious intensity she had clasped both her hands, "I love him so."

Mrs. Topham took those hands and held them in her own. She made her sit down beside her, and she talked to her — of herself, of the coming marriage and lastly of William: of William as a child with all a mother's fond and garrulous remembrance of tender trifles — and to them Nannie listened greedily; of William's boyhood, of William and Marion —

"He thought the world of her," said Nannie simply, "I know he did."

And lastly Mrs. Topham spoke of the William of to-day, the William, who to those who loved him promised such a problem.

"He's been much steadier lately," said Nannie with innocent directness. "Even yesterday —"

"I know," said Mrs. Topham. "Child, if love could help him —"

"I do," said Nannie eagerly, "he says I do."

"Sometimes," began Mrs. Topham; but Nannie's eyes were fixed upon her face and she had not the heart to go further nor lessen by one doubtful word the blessed hope that shone in them.

Mrs. Topham alluded to her husband.

Nannie's face fell.

"That is the worst of it," she said; "do you think he will ever —"

Mrs. Topham shook her head.

"Does William often speak to you about his father?"

"Sometimes."

"Against him?"

"Yes," said Nannie.

"And do you speak against him too?"

"I have done," said Nannie truthfully.

"Then don't," said Mrs. Topham, "for my sake."

Nannie caught the hand she held out and kissed it.

"I would do anything for you," she said impulsively.

Nannie discovered then that their talk had been long, that Mrs. Topham must want a cup of tea.

Mrs. Topham demurred, Nannie insisted.

"She would be but a minute," Nannie assured her, "for Becky would have left the kettle on before she went to milk. If Mrs. Topham would excuse her."

She went into the kitchen and soon returned, carrying a tray covered with a clean napkin, a Worcester china cup upon it — that Miss Deborah had brought her mother once from Harrogate — brimming with steaming tea, and some thin rolls of bread and butter of her own cutting upon a plate beside it.

"I was forgetting," said Mrs. Topham. She held out the parcel, "It is a necklace of my own. I meant it for William's wife. Undo your dress, my dear, and let me put it on."

Nannie did as she was bidden. Her throat and neck were milk-white and plumper than Mrs. Topham had expected. Mrs. Topham rose to her feet and clasping the string of pearls upon it, led her to the glass, that hung upon the wall.

"You must wear them on your wedding-day," she said, "and tell William that I gave them to you."

Nannie looked, flushed with pleasure and caught her breath. But it was not vanity that trembled in her voice as she turned to Mrs. Topham.

For the first time the girl realised the full amount of the step she was taking, its potent influences, its unseen hazards, and — as she had never done before — her new dignity.

"I will try," she said to Mrs. Topham like a child might, "I will try."

Nannie went with her visitor to the door. Mary Ann waiting in the pony chaise, had had refreshment too; and as William's bride stooped to take her cup and

plate, Mary Ann's sharp eyes caught sight of the pearls — and again as Nannie stood in the doorway looking after them; and "they were," said Mary Ann, waxing poetical over the remembrance, "like tears about her neck."

As Mrs. Topham drove over the bridge, the yellow leaves of the chestnuts by the river were rustling in the Autumn breeze, the horizon was stormy and against it heaved the black shoulder of the moor sullen and menacing; but above the huddled roofs of the little town upon the hill rose, — tall and slender and illumined by one lingering shaft of yellow light — the spire of Burnthorpe Church. And as Mrs. Topham fixed her weary eyes upon it, she took heart of grace: for it seemed to her that that tall and lovely spire was a symbol — a symbol of hope.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE NEW CURATE

ORDINARILY after the Fairs Burnthorpe lapsed into a state of apathy, that prevailed more or less unbrokenly till Christmas.

The few tourists, whom curiosity had tempted to the place to see a sight that each year, alas! is becoming more and more a shadow of what it was, left it like swallows once the three days' mart was over; and though on the Sunday following the Third Fair Day the smoke, rising sulkily from some long unused drawing-room chimney (even in these days Burnthorpe does not use its drawing-rooms for any but very state occasions), might betoken the presence of some honoured son or daughter or a visitor perchance outstaying welcome, the fire thus kindled was generally accepted by the observers more as a propitiation to old Mr. Topham's furniture than to mark an unseemly spirit of festivity, when all about one had fallen flat and dead.

But for once Burnthorpe was to taste the excitement of an exception.

The last Fair Day had fallen on a Friday; on the Saturday afternoon not a window in the Square but had its complement of observing eyes fixed on old Mrs. Topham's house, where punctually at half-past four the Burnthorpe 'bus was to be seen disgorging mid many packages and some interested passengers, the new Curate, who had come to lodge with Miss Mallaby.

Miss Mallaby, with so many touches of red about her bodice that she had more than ever the air of some particularly inquisitive and pugnacious robin, hopped back-

wards and forwards between the green front door and the 'bus, ushering in now the hat box, now the portmanteau, now the Gladstone bag, now the big box of books,—"Take care, John, you don't scrape the passage paper"—now, with a little scream, the fiddle case, that she said, "Excuse me, sir, but it looks so like a coffin;" and lastly with wilder flutterings than ever and as many curtsies as a water-wagtail, the Curate himself.

The Curate, the Rev. Thomas Morton, to give him his name as it had been announced in that month's Parish Magazine, once in and the 'bus rolling away, Miss Mallaby made haste to shut the green door with a vicious sort of slam as much as to say, to all those prying windows, "There now, I've got him. So have done with your prying, do,"—an action indeed which those same windows accepted in the spirit in which it was meant and made remarks about Miss Mallaby that were the reverse of friendly.

"Poor thing, I am sure I hope he'll be comfortable," said the stout wife of the Banker, as she returned from her window to her interrupted tea-table. "That little skinflint will line her pocket out of him, even if she has to starve him to do it."

"If she doesn't marry him instead," said the Banker.

"I wouldn't put that beyond her," replied his wife angrily.

Elsie Webb glanced at the clock. In her own mind she had given the Curate ten minutes to wash his hands. **He must now be sitting down to tea.**

"I do hope," said Elsie with a pensive look, "she won't tell him that I made the seed-cake."

"And why not?" said Elsie's mama. "He'll have far to go before he tastes a better."

Elsie was right in her calculations; the Curate even at that moment was taking his place in the chair that

had once been old Mrs. Topham's, whilst Miss Mallaby, as she presided behind the tea-urn, maintained a running commentary on the good things that graced the table.

There was a ham from Mr. Topham; eggs from the wife of the retired Draper, whose girls went in for poultry; cakes from Mrs. and Miss Webb; cream and a pat of butter from the Auctioneer's sister, whose brother kept cows; a cream cheese from Mrs. Oliver; and last but not least a bunch of Autumn leaves gathered by the fair hands of Miss Maria Lightfoot.

It was grimly amusing the way in which Miss Mallaby ran through the list, appraising the value of each gift without enthusiasm and weighing with it the possible motive of the donor.

"It's very kind of them," murmured the Curate. He was a tall, pale-faced young man, who mingled spiritual enthusiasms with the callow priggishness of his kind; but he was boyish enough to wish that Miss Mallaby, whose scarlet waistcoat and high-falutin' airs disconcerted him, would go away and leave him free to prop his book against the loaf and read, as was his custom, whilst he ate.

"Oh, it's very kind I daresay," said Miss Mallaby, nodding her head till the little fluffy curls upon it as well as her earrings were set a-jogging. "but there ain't no kindness done in Burnthorpe that ain't got something behind it an' that you'll find. The other Curate as came here was a family man—twins too he had,—an' he didn't get no pats of butter an' seed-cakes given to him by young ladies, I can tell you."

The Curate, who was eating a slice of Miss Webb's seed-cake thickly spread with the Auctioneer's sister's butter, blushed guiltily.

"My only 'ope is," said Miss Mallaby; and her air

as she folded her hands across her red front became dove-like in its modesty. "I only 'ope that both of us being single so to speak, you won't ever attribute no such haims and hobjects to me."

"Certainly not," said the Curate and the next minute was wondering why Miss Mallaby, who had left the room for hot water, should slam the door with unnecessary violence and make such a racket in the kitchen with the fire-irons.

Having finished his tea, the Curate rose and went to the window; and as he stood there looking out at the Market Place with its reck of sheep and the sawdust thickly sprinkled where the pens had been, Miss Mallaby, as she fluttered in and out clearing the table, told him about the Fairs, of the noise and the traffic and the dirt; of the merry-go-rounds that had spoiled her maiden slumbers with their din,—“fit to drive a body crazy”; of the play of human passions and of human folly, that had enacted itself among the booths; in short she told enough to furnish the musing Curate with stuff for his inaugural sermon that, youthful and immature as it was, did not wholly lack some illuminative and not unpoetic touches of deeper truths.

At any rate the opinion of his congregation on the Sunday seemed to be that for once their curiosity had been more than gratified.

The Tophams were at church in full force that morning. Mr. Topham, pompous and perhaps a little more than usually aggressive; Mrs. Topham, bearing herself with quiet dignity; Henry, a little bored but comforted to see Annie Oliver in her mother's place among the children and triumphant when he could attract her gaze across the spaces of the church; Miss Mary, alert and inquisitive, and paying marked attention to the Curate's

sermon, which except that it was delivered in church, where one expects to listen with respect to platitudes, had not a paragraph that was not at variance with every precept and action of her life.

After the service Mr. Topham, who filled with great importance the post of Vicar's churchwarden, came to the vestry and invited the Curate to return with him to the Belmont family dinner.

The procession they made as they walked across the Market Place, the Curate and Mr. Topham and Miss Mary ahead, Henry and his mother following more leisurely, was the topic of every dinner-table in Burnthorpe and put for a moment into abeyance that other interesting item of William Topham's approaching marriage. As regarded William indeed, sympathy on the whole was for Mr. Topham; and William's action was charitably attributed to some kink in his character that, having baffled the force of the parental arm (and the parental arm in Burnthorpe had ever been accounted the best and most efficient means of eradicating noxious qualities), had flourished thus to the young man's own destruction and the hurt of respectable parents.

The dinner that day at Belmont was of the best: there were partridges — a present from old Lady Metcalfe; hot roast beef; more damson tarts; a jelly, that Miss Mary had concocted and had somewhat stinted in the way of wine; and lastly the usual dessert, to which came Mary Ann and her two underlings for their customary glass of wine. The Curate, looking up from a dish of filberts that Miss Mary was handing him with a smile upon her face, that made Henry, as he told Annie Oliver afterwards, long to kick her for making up to such a fellow — noticed something at once

attractive and disturbingly familiar in Mary Ann's comely face, and when she had left the room remarked upon the girl's good looks to Mrs. Topham.

"What is more," said Mrs. Topham warmly, pleased that her treasure had excited notice, "she is as good as she looks. She has been with us many years now and I don't know what we should do without her."

"Really, mama," said Miss Topham, "in my opinion there are other servants quite as good as Mary Ann Wintersgill."

"What did you say her name was?" asked the Curate.

"Wintersgill," replied Miss Topham. "It's quite a common name here. There are dozens of them."

The Curate mused, looking thoughtfully at the mellow gold of his sherry.

"It is curious," he said slowly, and Mr. Topham looking up, fixed his eyes upon him, eyes that seemed to gleam beneath their thatch-like brows with an almost fierce interest, "but my mother had an aunt. It's rather a long story. But anyway she had some mysterious connexions called Wintersgill; people, I believe, in quite a humble way of life. She left them nearly all her money but the funny thing is we have never seen or heard anything of them from that day to this."

Miss Topham and her mother met his glance with faces of varying attention; the former with some half-haunting memory perhaps of the winter afternoon, when Mary Ann, a raw timid girl, had stood in that very room and been taunted by her master about some mysterious fortune; the other with only a passing interest in what for a time distracted her sad musing from William and what was passing at the Howe.

"I believe they lived somewhere in this district, too,"

continued the Curate. "I suppose you cannot tell me anything about them?"

Mr. Topham spoke before his daughter could purse her lips to a slow negative, the words tumbling out of his mouth as if he would clinch the matter once and for all and have done with it.

"I know the family you mean quite well. This girl of ours has nothing to do with them. They went from these parts long ago, all of them."

"I wonder what they did with their money?" said the Curate.

"Squandered it," said Mr. Topham roughly. "What else do you suppose such folk would do with it?"

The young man's face was an ingenuous study of some old disappointment. "We always thought," he said, "mother and I, that my aunt behaved very unfairly to us. She left my mother nothing at all, though she was a widow at the time and badly off."

Miss Topham glanced from her father's face to the Curate's, the one suspicious and on the defensive, the other wholly unconscious of offence.

Then she dropped her eyes and looked long and steadily at the cloth.

"I suppose," the Curate spoke again, "that I should hardly be able to find out anything about them now?"

"Nothing," replied Mr. Topham. "It's over a dozen years since they left and in these parts folk have not long memories. But if you like to come and have a pipe with me, I think I can tell you all you want to know about them."

CHAPTER XXV

MISS TOPHAM IS ENGAGED

It was afterwards said in Burnthorpe that never was a cap flung in more brazen-faced fashion at a man, than did Miss Topham aim that symbolical article at the head of the new Curate. Thus at least said the ladies; amongst the men, who take generally if not a fairer a more dispassionate view of such happenings, it was common report that Mr. Topham seemed as keen upon catching the Curate as Miss Mary herself; and the general impression extant of Miss Topham's temper suggested a reason that was not only unfair to the lady but in this case wide of the mark.

Never had such harmony prevailed at Belmont with Miss Mary at home as it did that winter. Father and daughter seemed to have sunk their differences (and quarrels between them had been many and bitter during Miss Topham's regency at the Howe) in one common object, the doing of honour to the Curate.

He supped, he dined, he did all, so Mallaby complained, who out of his board had planned to make considerable profit, he did all but sleep at Belmont. If he wished to go to Markington Mr. Topham's gig was at his disposal; if he wanted help for any of his poor (and the Curate was a zealous visitor), Mr. Topham's purse was open to him; the choicest grapes from Mr. Topham's greenhouse were his at a hint; the pick of Thackary's fish and game was left constantly at his door; and if the Curate, though perchance with watering lips, passed them on to others he deemed in greater need of them, his gratitude to Mr. Topham was not

the less for that. The Curate was quiet in his tastes. The poker parties at the Banker's were against his conscience; the Doctor's rubbers of whist and Mrs. Oliver's languid airs bored him; the kittenish daughters of the retired Draper frightened him with their gushing manners, their whispered jokes and suppressed giggles; and as to the Auctioneer's satirical sister, her tongue was never without the power to flay even in her mildest moments; and when she became affectionate and satirical and evasive and persuasive all at once the Curate fled her presence in dismay.

At Belmont there was always a welcome for him, that, even with Miss Mary, lurking prudish and prim in the background, did not suggest a matrimonial pitfall. He might smoke with Mr. Topham; he might chat with Mrs. Topham, who, kindly and gracious always, had not in spite of what was said concerning her at the Dorcas party, a thought of inveigling the young man into being her son-in-law; or he might if he would — and generally he did — play a gentle game of cribbage or bagatelle with Miss Topham, whose patience under defeat was a thing at which Henry, accustomed in his youthful days to carry with the palm of victory many a sisterly cuff, marvelled greatly.

Mr. Topham's charities were more pronounced than ever that year; and when at the gorgeous Christmas tree he gave the school children, Miss Mary and the Curate stood under its heavily laden boughs delivering the presents, the matrons of Burnthorpe owned they could no longer fight against the Tophams and retired from the field. But lavish in his philanthropy as Mr. Topham was; warm and enticing as was the atmosphere of Belmont; meek and chaste and so essentially fitted for a clergyman's wife as Miss Topham appeared to be, it was some time before the Curate finally succumbed.

His first impression of Mr. Topham had been disagreeable; the pride of purse, the vulgarity, the air of power that might be unscrupulously used; the implacable front he had shown his eldest son and his sister, which had formed one of Mallaby's prime themes of information; all this had repelled and set him half instinctively against the great man of Burnthorpe. Moreover the story Mr. Topham had told him that Sunday afternoon about his aunt's mysterious legatees, though it had in some inexplicable fashion tied his tongue, had also left him still at times a little incredulous and half suspicious.

But the Curate stood between two fires. Miss Mallaby in her way was as bent upon becoming Mrs. Morton as any other of the Burnthorpe spinsters; and so many and artful were the snares she laid for him that the life of her embarrassed lodger became one of perpetual jeopardy.

It was useless, when retired to his bedroom and locked and bolted there out of hearing of the chirping voice and the jingle of her beads, to swear in a white heat of terror and desperation that he would find other rooms. When morning came and Miss Mallaby waylaid him in the passage with tender questions as to why he had retired so early, and the soundness or unsoundness of his repose, even to the nature of his dreams and their significant comparison with her own; when she hovered round him with toast; and offered him marmalade as if it were frankincense; when she had his slippers warmed by the fire and even his paper aired; for sheer shame of his own ingratitude, the Curate felt he could not free himself.

No wonder that the Curate was glad to find a refuge by the Belmont hearth. No wonder that finding there its presiding genius always so kind, always gentle, and

with always — and it is a rare virtue in small communities, where interests are too apt to focus themselves upon the concerns and faults of one another — so lenient a tongue for her neighbours' shortcomings, he should invest Miss Mary Topham — invariably present on these occasions — with some reflected radiance of her mother's homely virtues. And indeed Miss Topham showed herself more amiable at this time than at any other former period of her life, so much so indeed that Henry, though making innumerable caricatures of her and the Curate in various attitudes of very disciplined love-making, owned to Annie Oliver that "Mary, poor old thing, was not such a bad sort after all."

But it was to Mrs. Topham that this unexpected blossoming of a character, that until lately had shewn little but a warped and seared barrenness, gave the keenest pleasure. Mary drew nearer to her mother that winter of the Curate's sojourn at Burnthorpe than she had ever since her childhood.

And Mrs. Topham was not one to cavil at the change as some might have done, to note, for instance, that Miss Mary's voice was perhaps a shade less amiable when the Curate was not there, or that his presence never failed to mark an increase of filial attentiveness; on the contrary she was all eager to assure herself, that this at last was the real Mary, shaking off the old faults and trivialities and coming at last to the true development of her womanhood.

And nowhere could one find a tenderer confidant than Mrs. Topham, nor one that could touch so skillfully the shrinking sensitiveness of romance, or more reverently approach life's unspoken sanctities. So that Mrs. Topham, though with no intention of making a match between the Curate and her daughter, must still

be reckoned as an unconscious but very successful party to the game; and as Mary's softened demeanour encouraged a maternal freedom that ventured to effect not only changes but an improvement in the damsel's appearance, so that often a bow was added or a lock of hair loosened or a new frock assumed when the Curate was expected,—then, I fear me, Mrs. Topham must yield to the arraignment of the Burnthorpe matrons and be branded for posterity as a matchmaker.

Truth compels me to state here that, though so changed, so affectionate to her mother, so dutiful to her father, so suddenly indulgent towards Henry's youthful extravagances and more soft of tongue to Mary Ann than she had been all the years of Mary Ann's long service, Miss Topham did at this time quarrel hopelessly with Elsie Webb and was never afterwards reconciled. Miss Topham thus in love, and love being infectious—the Curate caught the attack and wrote—as all curates and dutiful only sons should do, at once to his mother, describing the symptoms at some length (and they were serious enough to affect his appetite, which Mallaby tempted with all kinds of delicacies, a trouble—she later shrewishly declared—she never would have taken, had she divined the true state of affairs), and confidentially discussing the treatment to be followed, which was no other than Miss Topham herself matrimonially considered.

There had been a season in the Curate's life, when the young man had inclined towards celibacy as appearing to him the intensest outward manifestation of that interior sanctity, which through a perpetual sacrifice of the flesh reaches to the highest eminence of divine reward; and at the time his mother, a weak and poor little widow—already deprived as we have seen of considerable expectations as the disappointed legatee of

an eccentric female relative — was, for reasons connected with the expenses of housekeeping, the disadvantages of a penniless wife and the inevitable largeness of curates' families — fully disposed to agree with him.

But with Miss Topham as the bride prospective (and through her son's letters Mrs. Morton had heard much of the Tophams, though for a reason best known to the Curate and Mr. Topham nothing of the lawyer's connexion with her aunt's legacy) the matter took a different aspect. The Tophams were wealthy; the Tophams were influential; with Mr. Topham to back him, an ambitious young man might even dream o' nights of the Burnthorpe living and not in time to come, seeing that the Vicar was old and the gift in Lady Metcalfe's hands over whom Mr. Topham was said to have considerable influence, be disappointed.

Mrs. Morton, who occupied modest lodgings at Brighton, was at tea when her son's letter came. When she had read it, she forsook her tea and its accompanying shrimps and bread and butter; and sitting down at her shabby little davenport, had written off an epistle of no less than three pages to prove that celibacy was at the best a poor papistical sort of virtue (if a virtue at all and, as a moderate High Church woman Mrs. Morton had her doubts); and that marriage, particularly with a lady of such prospects of wealth as Miss Topham, was infinitely preferable and quite if not more conducive to that state of mind which fits us for heaven.

"Remember, dear," the widow reminded her son, in a postscript wholly meant to be pious and not at all to damp the Curate's amatory ardours, "We may serve God — as St. Paul says — even in bondage."

Having thus obtained the maternal sanction in so many sentences by return of post and at the sacrifice of

his mother's second and stronger cup of tea, the Curate's next difficulty was to find an opportunity of speaking upon the subject to Miss Topham. And if Miss Topham herself offered him that opportunity are we to blame her? The Curate was bashful and it is well known that bashful men — but then, the heart knows its own secrets and never will Mrs. Brown be brought to confess how hard it was to bring Mr. Brown positively bubbling over with his proposal, to the point when one does bubble over. In Burnthorpe it was unkindly said that Miss Topham proposed to the Curate herself.

No such thing. All that Miss Topham did was to pave the way — and this she effected in as pretty and innocent a fashion as was possible. One evening when Henry, intent on some business of his own, had summoned his mother from the breakfast-room, where the trio were sitting, the Curate asked Miss Topham if he might see her Confession book. Every young lady in those days had an album of confessions just as every young lady has a collection of picture postcards now. And as the Curate, without asking, had been shewn every album existent in Burnthorpe, and asked to contribute thereto, no wonder that he should thus shew an interest in the volume belonging to Miss Topham. And if it was Blind Chance or Miss Topham's finger, that guided him to that fair page on which, in an easily decipherable and somewhat legal hand, the lady had pencilled her own inmost yearnings, why should we cavil with either? What the Curate read was this — Miss Topham's dearest, most secret ambition was to be — not beautiful, not clever, only — a clergyman's wife!

The Curate looked up; he was trembling; so was Miss Topham. I don't know what he said but as their hands met it was no mere emotion but very genuine affection that sent the tears gushing to Mary Topham's eyes and

made her cry over that outstretched hand as she had not done since her childhood.

When Mrs. Topham returned, Mary's face betrayed her secret; and the good soul shed a few tears too in ready sympathy. Mr. Topham was absent at Bishop-ton; so it was arranged that the Curate should see him at the office in the morning.

At ten o'clock next day then, Miss Mary's suitor was ushered into Mr. Topham's private office, that same room which Mary Ann and her mother had so fearfully entered years ago. It was unaltered; there were the despatch boxes; the lawyer's desk; the revolving chair; the architect's plans for Belmont when Belmont had been known as "Topham's Folly" still hung upon the walls. Now-a-days the lawyer had only to look above his desk to have the laugh over his enemies. There in its oak frame hung a photograph of Belmont, that his wife had given him. Belmont completed, the solid handsome realisation of those skeleton sketches of the architect's and his own intense and masterful ambition. And if it reminded him too of that wintry day when Mary Ann's mother, alone with him, had told the tale of the legacy, and how whilst he had listened a door had seemed to open, a plan unfold,—what mattered that to anyone but Mr. Topham, still with the reins of Fate well gripped in those masterly hands of his?

There was tittering in the other office whilst the Curate was closeted with Mr. Topham; and Henry drew a caricature of the reverend gentleman on his marrow bones before Miss Mary, which he afterwards gave to Annie. Presently the door opened and Mr. Topham, dominant, jovial, triumphant was seen to issue forth, his arm linked familiarly in that of his future son-in-law.

They went together to Belmont, where Miss Mary modestly descended to the cold and cheerless drawing-room to receive them. They were not long alone, for Mr. Topham, who had been himself to the cellar, noisily summoned them to the parlour, where Mary Ann brought glasses and a corkscrew; and Mr. Topham with noisy jocularly drew the cork from a cobwebbed bottle of his oldest port.

Mrs. Topham came too, kissed her daughter over again and shielded her as well as she could from Mr. Topham's jokes, for Mr. Topham had always the same jokes for these sort of happenings, though they did not make his daughter wince as they had made Marion Oliver.

Then the lovers went out for a walk whilst Mr. Topham filled himself another glass of port; and then another: until Mrs. Topham quietly removed the bottle.

Ever since the coming of the new Curate she had noticed with increasing uneasiness that Mr. Topham was more and more inclined to extend his potations beyond the limits of sobriety.

CHAPTER XXVI

MARION VISITS THE HOWE

THE news of Miss Topham's engagement and approaching marriage was the first Marion heard, when at the end of June she came to pay her family a fortnight's visit.

She and her mother were sitting in the drawing-room. Marion herself would have infinitely preferred the old schoolroom, where she had dreamt and read away so many happy hours; but Mrs. Oliver did not know this and most possibly would not have understood her daughter's preference even if she had; and so the drawing-room had been swept and garnished the day before Marion's arrival and it was into it she was ushered with due ceremony as soon as she had removed her hat and cloak.

The drawing-room had about it the atmosphere of disuse and chilly splendour proper to such apartments in Burnthorpe; and although Mrs. Oliver had in it the pride of proprietorship, her husband and children never willingly entered it nor failed to be uncomfortable when they did. It had changed somewhat since Marion's marriage. The chairs had been re-covered; there were more antimacassars; more ornaments upon the mantelpiece; some new books on the mahogany table; there were other smaller tables that had not been there in the old days, plants in yellow and green pots, a fire-screen, new curtains in the windows and the latest craze in wool-work spiders (bought expensively at a Burnthorpe bazaar), crawling up them. The old piano, at which Marion remembered doing her practising

in winter with numbed fingers and a shawl about her shoulders, had been draped with silk and upon it in a leather frame (Annie's handiwork), a picture of herself in court dress and plumes.

"She meant to catch him, there's no doubt of it," said Mrs. Oliver, "and her father too. The fuss John Topham made of that man was something ridiculous."

She stopped, for Marion had posed one of her bronze slippered feet upon the steel bar of the fender; and Mrs. Oliver allowed no one—not even Marion—to put the drawing-room fender to such base usage. Marion saw the look, remembered the prohibition and removed the offending slipper hastily.

"I am so sorry, mama," she said gracefully, "I was so interested in Cousin Mary's engagement, I quite forgot."

Mrs. Oliver mollified by the explanation and her maternal pride pleasantly tickled by her view of the same slippers and Marion's embroidered silk stockings, (Mrs. Oliver's own hose had never been of anything but cotton or wool hand-knitted according to the season),—continued her story, though at random as was her custom.

"Of course Mary Topham would run after a broomstick in men's clothes. She has got to that age."

"Poor Mary," said Marion.

"But what made John Topham pay him such court,—that's the puzzle," said Mrs. Oliver. "He's no money and though your father thinks he does not preach badly, out of the pulpit he hasn't a word to say for himself. And yet he wasn't in the place twenty-four hours, before John was lauding him up to the skies. Now you know, Marion, your uncle never

makes up to people without a purpose.— what was that purpose?"

"Perhaps he has expectations," said Marion, laughing. "You never know, mama."

"Not he!" said Mrs. Oliver contemptuously. "Anyway, Mary Topham's got him and I wish him joy."

The door opened and Annie came in, sidling in, as Marion noticed at once—such was the effect of the drawing-room upon her—and with a basket of stockings in her hand.

"Oh, Annie," Mrs. Oliver exclaimed fretfully. "What an idea to bring stockings into the drawing-room. I won't have it."

"I thought I might as well be mending them as we talked, mama," said Annie gently.

"Not in the drawing-room," corrected Mrs. Oliver. "You may do fancy-work here if you like—but not stockings. I never heard of such a thing."

"Let her hide them behind the couch, mama," said Marion, "and come and talk a little. I am sure a rest will do you both good."

"She may do that if she likes," conceded Mrs. Oliver graciously, "but I hope to goodness no-one will come in and see them."

Marion and Annie glanced at one another a little look of affectionate amusement; they had learnt to treat their mother's foibles tenderly,—little foolish things that, when we come to look back at them from the lofty eminence of some obscure grave, touch us to tears. Mrs. Oliver having achieved her little triumph in gentilities, lapsed again into good humour and small talk.

"I was telling Marion about Mary Topham and Mr. Morton," she said to Annie.

"Yes, fancy Cousin Mary engaged," said Marion, "it seems too funny for words. Are they very lover-like?"

"Such prudes as never were," began Mrs. Oliver, before Annie could speak. "She was telling one of the Smith girls,—you remember the Draper's daughters, Marion?—that he has never kissed her yet and that she is not going to allow him to do so until after they are married."

Marion threw her head back and laughed till the room rang.

"That's Cousin Mary all over," she said when she could speak and mopping away the tears, that had come to her eyes, with a lace-edged handkerchief—in the corner of which Mrs. Oliver, quick to notice every detail about Marion, detected a coronet.

"Of course you have heard about William's marriage?"

There was the slightest perceptible pause before Marion answered her.

"Yes, Annie told me,—Annie, at letter-writing, you are quite a Sévigné,—How do they get on?"

"Well, really, I don't know. I ought to have called but I never seem to get time. Annie has been there once or twice."

"Henry took me," said Annie shyly. "She is very pretty, rather delicate, and in her way quite refined."

"Really," echoed Marion. "A refined milkmaid! How delicious!"

Annie did not answer. She was just a little afraid of this handsome sister with her ready laugh and occasionally scathing jest.

"And William?" said Marion.

"Oh, they say he's much better than he was," said Mrs. Oliver.

"Has he been ill?"

"Mama means steadier," explained Annie.

"He got dreadfully wild a while back," said Mrs. Oliver.—"Didn't Annie tell you? He used to spend all his time at the 'Black Horse' with George Fall. Really it's a mercy, all things considered, that you broke off that engagement, Marion."

Marion had taken a palm-leaf fan from the crowded mantelpiece and was waving it slowly to and fro.

"You must take me to call," she said to Annie.

"Let us go to-morrow."

"Do you think you'd better, Marion?" said her mother.

For the first time there was the slightest tincture of the old hauteur in Marion's voice, as she asked, "Why not, mama?"

"Well, of course, William's your cousin," replied Mrs. Oliver uneasily, "but she — might not Lord Winterfield" (Mrs. Oliver never mentioned her son-in-law without his title) "consider it derogatory?"

"Nonsense," Marion answered, laughing. "Why, she's the person who interests me most in all Burnthorpe. 'What for went ye out into the wilderness to see?' A refined milkmaid!"

And she laughed again, laughed all the more because Mrs. Oliver and Annie were looking at her with shocked faces.

The next day was fine and Marion persisted in carrying out their projected visit to the Howe in spite of her mother's and Annie's objections; her mother because she thought it beneath Marion's dignity; Annie's because her kindlier nature shrank from paying a visit that seemed to have little real friendliness in its design.

Marion dismissed Mrs. Oliver's protests with disdain, over-ruled Annie's reluctance and after the early

dinner (that was one of Mrs. Oliver's crosses), they started, Annie carrying with them a little basket, that Mrs. Topham, hearing of their design from Henry, had asked them to take for her to the daughter-in-law she had seen only once.

The two made a decided contrast. Marion in her white dress and rose-wreathed hat had combined simplicity and costliness, elegance and rustic prettiness with the skill and taste of the fashionable woman. Annie's woollen skirt and cotton garibaldi were dowdy in comparison: and her hat — Mrs. Oliver had insisted upon her putting on her Sunday one to match Marion's expensive capeline — trimmed with brown ribbon by Miss Forbes was homely in the extreme.

Marion — as she chattered incessantly, very amusing chatter that skimmed as lightly over the surface of her life as a martin's wings ripple the water of a village pond on an evening in summer, — glanced her sister up and down occasionally with a sort of indulgent curiosity. Despite the nearly twelve years between them a casual observer might easily have taken Marion for the younger of the two. There was a plodding sedateness about Annie, a quiet that was almost colourless, and yet beneath this quiet Marion, with more discernment than her mother, who frequently called her second daughter stupid, detected every now and then strange and deep intensities.

One revealed itself now, as, reaching the hill-top beyond the wood, they turned to look back over the shimmering tree-tops at Burnthorpe and the river that cut the holms like a silver thread.

"What a queer little handful of a place it is," said Marion smiling, "I couldn't live there. It would bore me to death. It bores me now. Don't you get tired of it too?"

"I?" echoed Annie Oliver. She too was looking at the prospect before them, her eyes missing no detail that affection had made her own,—yonder lap in the moors where the sun caught the fresh green of unturned bracken, that reach of the river where the still water broke into a myriad glinting arrow heads as it neared the dam, the spire, the house-tops, the familiar uphill road,—and she turned to Marion with one of those rare flashes of self-revelation, the more pathetic seeing that she alone of that large family was to die in exile from the things she loved,—“I,” she repeated, “I want nothing else but to live and die here.”

“You probably will, my dear,” said Marion, laughing, “you will become Mrs. Henry Topham. You will—Annie, just think of it—you may in time be mistress of Belmont. Belmont—”

She broke off suddenly and remained silent as the well-known path to the Howe ribboned the fields ahead.

There are households, more often perhaps those under the management of inexperienced housewives, in which on certain days the whole domestic machinery will in the most unaccountable fashion get itself hopelessly clogged. Such a day it was at the Howe that afternoon when Marion and Annie rang long and loudly at the front-door bell.

Nannie, when she had married William Topham, had known very little of housekeeping. Her sisters might milk the cows, scrub and bake and wash and iron; but from the very earliest days of her somewhat sickly childhood, Mrs. Thompson had set her youngest-born apart from the rougher lot of her sisters. Both she and her husband had doted upon this youngest and fairest of their children; and when William Topham's frequent visits to the “Black Horse” and unusual sobriety had seemed to denote another attraction than Thomp-

son's beer, Mrs. Thompson had considered herself more than justified.

"You'll have naught to do now," she told Nannie, upon the morning of her wedding-day, "but be a lady."

Nannie often smiled in the early days of her married life at the contrast between her mother's words and the reality. At the Howe there was work enough to do; there was almost more work sometimes indeed than Nannie's inexperience and old Ellen's failing vigour could well cope with.

Mr. Topham's only notice of their wedding had been to send in a claim — not for the farm — to have dispossessed William of the Howe would have meant putting the slow machinery of the law in motion and set tongues clacking — but for the stock the lawyer had put upon it.

To meet that claim meant that William must work — as he himself protested he had worked all along — with the bitter consciousness of bankrupt effort and benefit reaped not by himself but for another. But it also meant that within the house resources for a time at least must be severely pinched.

Nannie rose to the situation with a courage that was hardly to be expected from one of her upbringing; and as perhaps her very diversity from her sisters had given her a certain reserve with them, she kept her own counsel and at the "Black Horse" not a hint leaked out of the real state of affairs at the Howe.

She rose early, she worked hard, and she won from Ellen Thorpe, at first disposed to resent a "Thompson's daughter" being set over her, a grudging admiration that soon gave way to a real and lasting affection.

"Tell the missus there's no fault to find with her," Ellen Thorpe had said to Mary Ann, who had come one Sunday after the new mistress's installation apparently

to see her old instructor but in reality to carry some inkling of affairs to Mrs. Topham. And when soon after her home-coming, Nannie, full of her domestic failings, had gone one night into the kitchen, when the lads had gone to bed, and said to her appealingly: "Ellen, the master says you know all there is to be known about a house,—won't you teach me?"—Ellen had capitulated.

"It's easy to teach them as aims to learn," she had said in her oracular way. But from that evening, there was nothing she would not have done to have smoothed the path of life for those young feet.

And as Mrs. William Topham did "aim to learn" she did gradually attain considerable domestic proficiency: the news of which being sent from time to time to the elder Mrs. Topham was highly gratifying to her.

But that day that her husband's cousins came to see her, things seemed to have gone wrong from sunrise.

Ellen was busy churning and the butter wouldn't come; the men were haymaking and at the last moment William had sent word for dinner to go down to the fields; then Nannie had found her bread-crock empty and had had to bake, whilst Ellen Thorpe made up the butter and tended to the house.

Nannie had gone up to her room to rest, when Marion roused the echoes of the silent house by her imperious ringing.

Ellen Thorpe peeped through the hall window and then ran upstairs to warn her mistress.

"Be sharp and tidy yourself," she said through the keyhole, "there's Miss Annie Oliver and that grand sister of hers at the door looking as fine as you please."

CHAPTER XXVII

THE SERPENT'S TOOTH

So this was the beautiful cousin William Topham had once loved. Thus ran the thought in Nannie's head, as she sat uncomfortably on the edge of one of her own drawing-room chairs facing her visitors and miserably conscious that in the hurry of the day's work she had forgotten all about the "parlour," that dust to her hypersensitive imagination was painfully apparent and that the flowers in the vases should have been changed that morning. Ellen Thorpe's hint to tidy herself she had taken at more than its full worth and had donned none other than her wedding dress. It was a gown of some grey material, that might have been pretty, if the taste of Nannie's family had not ordained that it should have a high lace collar stiff with buckram, and a front of white silk, that looked like an ironing board.

But Nannie was proud of her wedding dress; it was always sponged after she had worn it and put away between sheets of tissue paper; and though the high collar hurt her neck and she never felt at ease in it, that she had always considered was one of the peculiarities of best dresses and tallied in degree with their smartness.

To-day, facing Marion, it suddenly dawned upon her, that there was something wrong somehow with the grey dress; never had the collar seemed so tight and stifling; never had the silk front crinkled more aggressively every time she moved than it did this afternoon. She felt too that her hair was all wrong; that her face

was red and shining still from its hasty application of soap and water; and that her tongue, try to control it as she would—would slip back into the old familiar way of speaking she was trying so hard to overcome.

Marion, smiling, yet in an indefinable way of her own at once haughty and indifferent, talked at random, her eyes, as she talked, taking in every detail of the once familiar room; and Nannie felt ruefully certain that neither the dust nor the withered flowers escaped her.

"Would you mind," said Marion, checking a sentence midway, "if we had the window open, I feel a little faint."

Nannie was on her feet in a moment and struggling with the sash.

"I should have been opened before," she said, "but I've been that 'throng' to-day" (oh, thou unlucky Nannie), "I don't seem to have had time for aught."

"I am afraid we have chosen an awkward day," said Nannie sympathetically, "we should have let you know."

"Oh, it's not that," said Nannie, true to her inherent hospitality, and returning to her seat with cheeks all the redder for her exertions with the window, "it's not that. Only to-day things do seem to have gone that contrary"—again a slip—"I feel fair *moithered*."

"They have a way of doing that, haven't they?" said Marion politely, and glanced at the clock.

"I forget to think on and wind it up," explained the unfortunate Nannie. "But you're never going yet? You must stay and have tea with us." She turned insistently to Marion,— "William would be that disappointed if he didn't see you. I'll send a message to the fields and tell him you are here."

"It is very kind of you to ask us to stay," said Marion. "I should like to see William. But why

send a message? Cannot we walk down to the fields ourselves?"

Nannie hesitated. She was aware that if her visitors remained to tea, there would be certain arrangements of the table which she dared not leave to Ellen Thorpe; such as table-centres, doilies, fresh flowers and the like.

Annie saw the hesitation and defined the cause.

"Suppose Marion and I walk down to the fields as you are busy," she said, "and then we can bring William back to tea with us."

"Yes, let us," said Marion, rising at once. "That would be very nice."

"It'll take you a quarter of an hour to walk there —" said Nannie, uneasily conscious of a jealousy, that prompted her to consign her table-centres and doilies to Fate and accompany them, "and a quarter of an hour to walk back, so I'll have tea ready for you in half an hour."

"I am afraid we are rather a trouble to you," said Marion, not troubling to disguise her relief at being quit of the stuffy room and out in the air.

"Nannie won't make any fuss for us, will you, Nannie?" said Annie kindly.

"Oh, no," said Nannie, fibbing cheerfully, for the table-centres *et cetera* were strictly reserved for state occasions, "we'll just have it in our ordinary way."

"That's right," said Annie. She laughed and nodded and hastened to rejoin her sister, who was already half way down the garden path.

"Faugh!" said Marion, glancing back at the house, "what a room, what a little rustic,—and what a dress!"

"It was her wedding dress," said Annie gently. "It was a pity she put it on to-day, for she looks so nice in her ordinary things."

"I will take your word for it," said Marion laughing, "but it's difficult to imagine it. I suppose this is the field she means."

"Yes," said her sister, "there's William near the carts."

He had seen them almost as Annie spoke and, plunging his fork into the ground, advanced to meet them. Marion, he had recognised immediately. Wasn't it thus she had come to him long ago across the stubble of the harvest field? The man, who was working near him, saw and commented afterwards upon the flush that came at sight of her to the master's face. Whatever Marion had meant to say died suddenly upon her lips; and they met and shook hands quite silently.

It was Annie who, all unconscious of the poignancy of that momentary pause, broke it clumsily.

"We thought we would come over to see Nannie," she said, "and she has sent us to bring you in to tea."

"Did she?" said William. He glanced down at his sunburnt hands, at the hay seeds clinging to his trousers, at the stream of empty carts coming into the field. "We are too busy for me to get away, I'm afraid. If you want your men to work it doesn't do to leave them."

"Oh, you must come," said Marion, recovering her composure. "Fancy our walking all this way to ask you and then refusing!"

"If you wish it," said William.

"Your wife wishes it," corrected Marion.

"Can you wait a few minutes, whilst I give the men some orders?"

"You and Marion walk up together," said Annie innocently, "and I will go back and help Nannie. I expect she is making all kinds of preparations."

Marion nodded indifferently. A little heap of hay

was near her and she sat down upon it, lowering her sunshade until it was a screen between her face and the curious gaze of the haymakers.

"I am sorry to keep you waiting," said William at last, "but these beggars take a lot of explaining to sometimes."

Marion took the hand he offered her and rose to her feet.

"Poor William," she said mockingly, "you speak as if you had a lot of cares."

"I have had my share," said William quietly. He glanced down at his companion furtively. "You don't look as if you had many"—the name came with a jerk as if he were nervous of a liberty—"Marion?"

"Do I not? Well, if I have not many cares, I have other things as bad perhaps—regrets, wishes,"—she shrugged her shoulders, "I know not what."

"Regrets," William said eagerly, "what do you regret?"

She half halted in their sauntering walk.

"Will you be angry if I tell you of one thing? I have always regretted that day of grandma's funeral, when I did not care how much I hurt you so long as I made you your father's scape-goat,—do you remember?"

"Do I remember?" William replied grimly. "Oh, yes, I remember; I am not likely to forget."

"I wrote a note to you," continued Marion slowly and prodding the tip of her sunshade absently into the ground,— "that night after the funeral, you know. I was going downstairs to post it when mamma called me into the nursery. She began to talk about Uncle John and the Will — and — and I tore the note up and burnt it."

"Naturally," William said dryly.

"Let us walk on," said Marion hurriedly. "We must not talk any more of these things. Mine—" she spoke the words to herself—"are vain regrets."

They walked on, his long stride shortening itself to her step, and both silent.

"I suppose your husband is at Uncle James's, with you?" said William at last.

"Oh, no, he isn't," Marion answered lightly. "He's gone to take the cure at Kissingen. I was afraid I might have to go with him but fortunately I succeeded in finding a most charming young person as nurse; and they are there quite happy together."

She answered the look in William's eyes, half amused, half scandalised.

"You must not take me too literally," she said quickly. "He is very kind and very good. Only it would have bored him to come to Burnthorpe, so we agreed for once to go our own ways."

They had reached the Black Pond and as they walked side by side along the narrow path, that skirted its edgy margin, it was possible that the remembrance of that other walk, when Miss Topham so fortunately had lost her Dorking cock, stirred both uneasily. "The reeds," said Marion, "how I love the reeds with their flowers like brown ruffles."

And William cut a handful with his pocket knife and put them in her hand. Some water from their stalls dripped upon her skirt and as William brushed it off the contact was perceptible to them both and both looked up.

"Marion!"

"William!"

It was a moment only,—one of those swift unveil-

ings that pass like a flash: and Marion was the first to pull herself together. "I think I see Annie in the window," she said. "They will be waiting tea."

As they crossed the garden they caught sight of Nannie, a big white apron protecting the grey dress, scurrying away to the kitchen out of their sight. A moment later she came back,—blushing and without the apron—to take Marion upstairs to wash her hands. She showed her into the spare room,—a room that had been set apart as such even in the Falls' time. The best furniture was here,—a mahogany bedstead with flowered chintz hangings, a chest of drawers with mother-of-pearl handles, a marble wash-stand. Nannie peeped into the jug, which was empty, and ran away to fill it at the tap.

The window was closed and the room had a musty odour, that strangely affected Marion's nerves. She knew well the uses of such rooms in households like these. It would be here—if there was a child—and a fleeting vision of the distorted folds of Nannie's grey gown made her shrug her shoulders disgustedly—that it would first see the light; here—if anyone died—that they would be laid out with drawn blinds and the key turned in the door.

She got up and crossed the landing to the room over the porch, that she herself had occupied, when she had visited the Howe during the brief rapture of her engagement to William. It was evidently unused. The floor was littered with boxes,—bonnet boxes of Nannie's, a portmanteau and old leather trunk of William's—Marion, glancing at the label, saw Edinburgh and wondered if it was there the pair had been for their honeymoon. In the window was a sewing machine and a chair with a half-finished blouse folded

over the back. Marion pushed the chair aside and stood looking out.

There below was the grass-plot and the old sundial beside which William had stood of a morning and wakened her with a handful of gravel flung against her pane; there were the fields, and there clustering about the frame was the rose tree from which—to Miss Mary's lasting scandal—she had gathered a bud and pinned it to William's coat the morning she had left the Howe.

It was there Nannie found her, as—jug in hand—she sought her missing guest. Marion lingered at the window with a little secret movement of her handkerchief to her face, that Nannie was quick to observe.

"Forgive me for coming in here," she said at last, turning round, "but I always liked this old room so much."

"You are very welcome," the other said simply: "I like it too. You see all the fields from yonder window and a bit of the road. If William's late, I always come up here to watch for him."

"Really," said Marion carelessly.

She was back in the spare room, washing her hands in the old-fashioned china bowl, wiping them on the fragrant towel Nannie handed her, arranging her hair in front of the toilet glass with its muslin draperies and blue bows and—to pin some lace in place—heedlessly destroying the "Welcome" that Ellen Thorpe had wrought in pins upon the yellow satin cushion, that had been her wedding present to William Topham.

The tea was a great meal. There were cold ham, tea-cakes, pastry,—all the dainties in fact that Nannie's larder could provide, but conversation languished.

William seemed self-engrossed; Marion looked bored

and tired: Nannie was nervous. It was Annie alone who contrived to spin out the thin and friable thread of Burnthorpe gossip and the little domestic concerns it pleased Nannie to discuss.

Directly after tea the cousins rose to go.

"I'll come a bit of the way with you," said William rising.

"Come as well," said Annie Oliver to their hostess. But Nannie shook her head. The grey dress had never yet been desecrated by contact with green earth; moreover there was tea to clear, her doilies to fold and put away, and her own finery to be removed before she could go and feed her poultry. Still she glanced at William as if seeking permission or perhaps encouragement, but William with his back turned made no sign.

Then Marion thanked her politely: Annie lingered to whisper a forgotten message of Mrs. Topham's; and Nannie ran alone upstairs to the window of the porch room.

She saw the cousins cross the garden; saw William give his hand to Marion as they climbed the stile; saw him keep the pace beside her adown the hill and along the sedgy edges of the pond; saw Annie drop instinctively behind; and thus seeing — forgot her wedding dress, and all her care of it — and, sinking down upon the floor beside the sill, cried desolately.

William had seen his beautiful cousin, and — this was the bitter divination that racked and shook poor Nannie with great sobs — he loved her still.

"Missus," Ellen Thorpe called up the stairs, "be you going to side all these here fangle-dangle things or am I?"

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE LETTER FROM CANADA

THE day that Marion and Annie went to the Howe, Henry and his father had had, to describe the event in Henry's own words,—“the devil of a row.” Mrs. Topham had detected the ominous signs of its approach as early as the previous Sunday. Sunday at Belmont was ever an intolerable day to the active-minded, a day when the petty restrictions of Mr. Topham's worldly piety hampered and irritated his household at every turn.

On ordinary Sundays, after putting in a compulsory appearance at the morning service and partaking of the heavy Sunday dinner, Henry generally went for a walk, winding up the afternoon as often as he dared with tea at the Olivers' and dalliance with Annie later in the old-fashioned garden.

But on the Sunday of which I write, the weather had been wet and uninviting; and Henry, having yawned prodigiously after dinner and being reprimanded by his father, had betaken himself to his bedroom, where between snatches of a novel, he had further beguiled the time with patience.

Mr. Topham, having enjoyed his after-dinner nap, awoke to the fact (then being discussed by Miss Mary) that Henry had not gone out, that he had shut himself in his room and that, as he was still there and had apparently found something sufficiently amusing to make him late for tea, that something must necessarily be an infringement of Mr. Topham's sabbatical laws.

"Possibly he has fallen asleep," said Mrs. Topham. "Mary Ann, ring the bell again."

"No, she won't," said Mr. Topham grimly. "I'll go myself and see what he's up to. It's nothing to his credit, I'll be bound."

At the moment his father spoke, Henry was studying the problem known as the "Demon," and in it he was sufficiently absorbed to hear nothing of Mr. Topham's approach, not even the opening of the door.

"Well, sir!" said Mr. Topham.

"Well, sir!" said Henry, not meaning to be rude but betrayed into the retort by the start of his father's appearance.

"So this is how you amuse yourself, is it?" exclaimed Mr. Topham, "with these paltry paste-boards, these devil's playthings? Give them to me, sir!"

Henry swept his demon into a little heap and gave them sullenly to his father. Mr. Topham took them silently and marching slowly ahead of him down the stairs with a pompous gravity, that in spite of his annoyance tickled Henry's ever-present sense of humour, — carried them into the kitchen and threw them solemnly upon the fire.

At the tea nothing more was said. Henry ate and drank quite silently, only smiling once or twice as he met his mother's anxious eyes searching his face; Mr. Morton and Mary engrossed themselves with one another; whilst Mr. Topham ate his favourite buttered toast and drank his regulation cups of tea with the air of a man who had just fulfilled a disagreeable but laudable duty. Only Mrs. Topham, conscious that the calm was only the ominous lull that precedes the storm, let her lips move in silent prayer, her anxious fancy ever ready to anticipate the tragedy that might be breeding

from the father's tyrannical temper and the son's impetuous youth.

On the Monday afternoon as she and Miss Mary sat together in the morning-room, she confided some of her fears to her daughter.

Miss Topham, with her mother's help, was making her trousseau. It was an outfit, whose elaborate details were long afterwards discussed by the Burnthorpe matrons. For its provision Mr. Topham had given his daughter a handsome cheque; and Mrs. Topham had seen to it that the materials were such as would bear the inspection given them by her own and Mary's friends. Mary, who had formerly fashioned her underwear of the stoutest calico calculated to resist a washerwoman's ravages and had disapproved of trimmings (indeed trimmings as applied to undergarments had a something in Miss Mary's opinion that smacked too much of frivolity not to say downright indiscretion) had under the spell of this new mood that was upon her yielded to her mother's influence and permitted — not without a dawning instinct of feminine pleasure in such things — the purchase of innumerable yards of lawn and nainsook, of fine laces, embroidery and ribbon. The materials employed being of the best, and both ladies past mistresses in the art of stitching, it was no wonder that Miss Topham's trousseau should prove a nine days' wonder to those of her friends and acquaintances, who were privileged to see it. At the moment when his mother spoke of Henry, Miss Topham was stroking down fine gathers with a pin. Her lips were pressed and her expression somewhat shrewish. But there was cause enough — Miss Topham that afternoon had had a disappointment. "Thomas" — by no other name did Miss Mary ever speak of or address her suitor —

"Thomas" had promised to take her for a walk and had not appeared. Three times had Miss Topham, fancying she heard his step, run upstairs and put on her hat, and three times had it proved to be a false alarm.

On each occasion Mrs. Topham had sought some means of consoling her. Possibly Thomas had letters to answer—or a visitor might have detained him—or he would not be long now, surely; but when the clock on the mantelpiece struck four and the Curate had not yet appeared, Mrs. Topham had been convinced that it must be a sick call and had remarked soothingly, "that at any rate they could get on with their sewing." And indeed there was little time left for the completion of Miss Topham's bridal outfit; for since his daughter's engagement, Mr. Topham had hurried on events with a masterful hand and that day month had been fixed for the wedding.

"Mary," the lawyer had told his daughter jestingly (Mrs. Topham had thought brutally). "could not afford to give a man's affection the chance of cooling by keeping a bridegroom waiting."

It was not surprising then that, considering the curate's non-appearance, Miss Topham should answer her mother with some of her old tartness.

"Well, and if papa is displeased with Henry, I think he deserves it. I only wonder what he would say if he knew the truth about that night when Henry stayed at William's and went to hear that dreadful Opera Company at Markington?"

"Mary," said her mother aghast, "you must never breathe a word of that to your father."

"Oh, I shan't tell," said Mary. "I shall very soon be married and then Henry and his concerns will have nothing to do with me, thank goodness."

"My dear," said her mother, "a young man must

have a certain amount of pleasure and if it is forbidden him foolishly, he will take it secretly. I hope you will believe what I say when you come to have children of your own."

"I agree with papa," said Miss Topham, who had turned very red at this reference of her mother's to a possible family. "I agree with papa that there's far too much pleasure now-a-days. People think of nothing else."

At that moment tea was announced; and with it the Curate—pale, dusty and sufficiently apologetic to restore Mary to good humour and make her order Mary Ann to butter a hot muffin specially for his benefit.

On the Wednesday as Mrs. Topham had anticipated fearfully and Miss Topham indifferently, the storm broke.

Mr. Topham was upset in the morning by a letter with the Canadian postmark; over its perusal his face had turned purple; he had sworn at Mary Topham for creaking her chair; and later, when Henry appeared, as Miss Mary had at once exclaimed,—“Late as usual”—the lawyer had stormed at him.

The thing might have passed off then, for Henry was not ill-natured and his mother had already signalled to him that there were other causes for the paternal ire, had it not been for a remark of his sister's made as Henry left the room.

"I was right, mama," said Mary triumphantly. "Henry did go fishing yesterday afternoon. Thomas told me last night, he saw him with Tom Oliver below the bridge."

"What's that?" said Mr. Topham.

Mrs. Topham interceded.

"He asked if he might, love," she said conciliatingly.

"It was such a splendid afternoon and he was working very hard all the evening."

"I don't care if he were working all night," blustered Mr. Topham. "When I am at Markington he has no business to be away from the office and I'll teach him — the young devil!"

Something in his face and voice made Mrs. Topham say "John," pleadingly and Miss Mary look a little frightened.

When Mr. Topham got to the office Henry was already at his desk.

"Come in here," the lawyer said grimly and Henry followed him obediently to the room marked "Private."

"So you spent yesterday afternoon fishing, did you?" said Mr. Topham, with the fateful calm of anger at red heat.

"I did," said Henry. "Why?"

The lawyer's repetition of the word was a roar that penetrated to the outer office and set the clerks tittering.

One went to the key-hole.

"If you dare to raise your hand against me," he heard Henry say, "I'll knock you down."

"Good Lord!" he said to the others, "the old man is threatening to thrash him."

In the inner office the voices of father and son mingled in angry altercation. Then the door burst open and Mr. Topham red, angry and panting, came out and turned the key in the lock.

Henry's first thought at being locked in was that "those bounders" as he called his father's clerks, should have the laugh at him. Then determined to brave out the situation he wheeled his father's chair round on its pivot, placed his feet on the desk, and, leaning back, considered his position. He glanced at the window but it was high and securely barred. It

was clear he must remain his father's prisoner until Mr. Topham chose to release him. But once free — and Henry ground his teeth in the strenuousness of his resolve — not another stroke of work would he do in his father's accursed office, no, not for his mother nor even for Annie.

Adventure and romance had always appealed to him. He would turn the liking to account. He bethought himself of his stolen visit to the Opera at Markington — the stage, yes, that was the thing. More than once he had convulsed "those skunks in the outer office" with some improvised play of mimicry and pantomime; and he would do better than that. He felt his blood tingle. He saw himself working hard, carving a great name, coming back to Burnthorpe a famous man — and so dreaming he fell asleep.

It was half-past one by his father's clock and Henry knew by the silence that the other clerks had gone home to dinner.

He rose and stretched himself. Would his father tell them at home, he wondered, and would his mother exercise her fond wits and devise some way of sending him something to eat?

He went to the door and was about to try the handle, when a letter lying on the floor attracted his attention. It was the Canadian letter, that had made Mr. Topham so angry at breakfast. His father must have dropped it in taking out his handkerchief to mop his angry face, as he left the room. As there was nothing else to do he would read it. He took it slowly out of its envelope, examining the postmark, the paper, the signature, with the curiosity of enforced idleness.

"George Wintersgill, Mary Ann's brother, by Jove! What on earth was he writing about?"

He read the letter; he re-read it. His hand went to

his head as if he were dazed. Then he glanced about him quickly. Among the black deed boxes that lined the room was one with no name upon it. Henry took it down, picked the lock with his pen-knife, and took out a bundle of papers. One had the signature—"Elizabeth Wintersgill."

"My God!" said Henry.

He thrust the papers back, replaced the box, put the letter amongst the others in his father's rack.

Then he sat down once more on his father's chair and bowed his head upon his hands. The fine career he had planned, where was it? Shame and ignominy and dread had blotted it from his mind.

An hour or two later the senior clerk unlocked the door.

"Mr. Henry," he said, not unkindly as the shame-stricken lad staggered before him, "the old lady at the Hall is dying and your father's gone to make her Will. I'd go home if I were you and get something to eat."

Henry scarcely touched the sumptuous tea his mother and Mary Ann had prepared to take the place of his forfeited dinner; and Mrs. Topham, reading in his pre-occupation and downcast looks the bitterness of his recent humiliation, forebore to question him. It was she who suggested that Henry should go to the Olivers' and enquire for her how his cousins had found the household at the Howe.

Henry went by the fields at the back of the house, and meeting with Tom at the kennel, asked him to tell Annie to come to him in the garden. Henry admired Marion: she fascinated and dazzled him: but he was in no humour that night to meet her grand-world manner and brilliant witticisms with that readiness which consoled his boyish pride.

Annie came at once — too absorbed in her delight at seeing him to notice at first any difference in his manner: and hand in hand they entered the garden.

The grounds at Belmont might have more to boast of in the way of expensive flowers, studied tending, costly design; but in this old walled garden of James Oliver's there was beauty of another sort — the charm of old association, of affection and remembrance, that can never be quite up-rooted from a place that men have really cherished and about which have twined the varied sentiments, the interests and tendernesses of many lives. Annie paced now beneath the arch of trellised apple boughs — a young maid with her lover, where as a child she had played unheedingly.

The south wall was espaliered with peach and plum trees; but beneath that on the other side, covered with homely currant vines the ground had been divided into tiny plots — plots that the children that once had tilled them had abandoned, when they themselves had passed out of the garden of childhood; but kept as they had left them and with their boundary lines of white pebbles still intact.

A moss rose tree still flowered in the patch that had been Marion's; in James's, who had had engineering tastes, were the remains of an ingenious chain of water works: Wilfrid's — with a view to interminable pickles to which the youth had been much addicted — was rank with capers: Tom had gone in for herbs: whilst in a fifth row of half-ruined shell-work and miniature beds and paths told of what had once been an ambitious copy of the Italian garden at the Hall.

Henry and Annie paced up and down the path beside them now: and at her own plot Annie stooped and gathered a purple pansy, which she fastened into Henry's coat.

"What is the matter, Henry," she said affectionately. "I don't believe you've heard a word I've said to you. And you look quite pale and ill, poor boy."

"And I feel it," Henry said. "My God, I feel it."

"Henry," exclaimed the frightened girl, "what is it? What makes you talk like this? Father's in the surgery —"

"He wouldn't do me much good," Henry said, laughing harshly. "It's not medicine I want. Annie — if I tell you, and I must tell somebody or I shall go mad, I think — can you keep a secret?"

"You know I can," she said.

"Then" — he glanced nervously round, as if the faint rustle of the night air amid the trees had been the step of an eavesdropper.

"There is no one," Annie said. "Marion is showing mama some of her dresses. The boys are all out. The children are in bed. No one will come here. We are quite alone."

And so Henry told her in fearful half whispers, with backward looks of apprehension, with sudden starts and long pauses of unutterable shame.

Annie's face was white when he had finished but her hand still lay in his.

Henry mopped away the sweat that had broken out upon his forehead with his handkerchief.

"You know it all now," he said. "Sooner or later the truth is bound to come out. And then?"

"And then," repeated Annie.

"You'll have to give me up. You cannot help it. Uncle James would make you. It's the end."

"And if I would not give you up, Henry," said the girl softly, "if papa were willing to let things remain as they are? What then?"

"If that were only possible," said Henry. "If that

were only possible,—oh, my God—then I could face it. I would work like a black in that beastly office. I would do all I could to wipe it out. If you would stick to me—”

“You know I should stick to you if we were married,” said Annie simply. “Why not now?”

And the steadfast hands she laid upon his shoulders and pressed against his breast, bowing his head upon them, as for a moment the horror of what he had told her overcame him and cruel tears for his father’s name fell hot upon them.

CHAPTER XXIX

WILLIAM TOPHAM

"To be sure I never seed aught to equal our Nannie, never," remarked Mrs. Thompson, as she and her daughters foregathered in the house-place one morning for their customary "snack" at eleven o'clock. "She looked as pale as skimmed milk in Church on Sunday and about as poor in sperrit. 'Whatever ails you?' I says to her, and when I see her at night, 'In your condition,' I says, 'you should be as happy as possible not fretting,' I says, 'unless you want the baby to be that worry, there'll be no doing with it.' 'I am not fretting,' she says to me. 'Really, mother, it's nothing,' she says, 'I am quite, quite happy.' 'Well, then, all I can say,' says I, 'is that if folk judge you by your countenance you don't look it.'"

"'Twas the close Church, mebbe," said Becky, blowing the froth from the mug of ale Miss Deborah had just filled for her. "The way that that young man of Miss Topham's do maunder on to be sure. Talking of killing souls yesterday, he was,—why, I ain't got the patience to harken to him."

The Curate's sermon, to which Miss Becky had thus alluded, had made a distinct impression upon Burnthorpe; and might have made more, had the little congregation understood, how it indicated a dilemma of the Curate's own,—a dilemma approaching acuteness and so intimately connected with his approaching union with Miss Topham, that had the young lady guessed the true trend of her lover's paragraphs, it is to be doubted whether she would have listened with such in-

dulgent serenity to a discourse, that had seemed to her practical mind as well as to Becky, largely made up of high-flown ideas and nonsense.

To tell the truth, on that Monday afternoon when the Curate had failed in so signal and ungallant a fashion to take Miss Mary the walk they had planned on the Sunday evening, it was not, as Mrs. Topham had soothingly suggested,—parochial business, nor an unfortunate visitor, nor a sick call that had delayed him but — a discovery.

Writing at the old-fashioned escritoire that morning,—the escritoire that had once been old Mrs. Topham's, and that still had its place in the dingy dining-room, unaltered indeed except for new curtains and a couple of brackets adorned with macramé work—Miss Mallaby's favourite handicraft—since the day Mary Ann and Henry had taken the old lady one of her daughter-in-law's sponge cakes,—the Curate tapping idly at the panelled back found it was hollow.

Curiosity, that was half boyish, and a pen-knife did the rest. A panel slid back—it was odd that Miss Topham's sharp eyes had not long ago found out the secret—discovering a small compartment filled with old newspaper clippings. Glancing these over—idly enough, and with Miss Mallaby, who had come in to lay the cloth for dinner, looking over his shoulder,—one heavily scored with red ink attracted attention beyond the rest. It was Miss Mallaby's bony fingers, that snatched it from the wondering Curate; and her piping voice, that read aloud the same advertisement which had long ago attracted Mary Ann.

"Thomas Morton Bagster. Why! I shouldn't wonder if it isn't Mary Ann Wintersgill's grandfather. Her mother was a Bagster."—and out came the old story, half legend, half truth, that in the early days of

her coming to the Howe had woven itself about the personality — unique and therefore incomprehensible — of Mary Ann's mother.

"Depend upon it," commented Miss Mallaby with one of her bird-like jerks. "they never saw it. There's some folk, that go through life with their eyes shut and wouldn't see a fortune — nor a suitable wife" — and Miss Mallaby had concluded with an emphasis that the Curate felt to be distinctly personal — "no, not if they was to step over them."

Miss Mallaby suggesting that the cuttings should be restored to Mr. Topham, the Curate had folded them up, saying that he would himself render them up that evening. Then lost in thought he had sat down to his dinner, oblivious that the mutton was underdone and half cold, and that the cinders in the gravy suggested that Miss Mallaby — spurned and rejected — was literally heaping coals of fire on his head.

After dinner he had gone out, forgetting all about his appointment with Miss Mary Topham, forgetting everything indeed except *this*, — that if what Mallaby had said of the Wintersgills was true then what Mr. Topham had told him was not true.

He had given the papers up to Miss Topham that evening but with only a mumbled explanation and with the special paragraph, that had caused him so much uneasiness, tucked well out of sight; and Mary, remarking cheerfully that "she had never known anyone so fond of hoarding rubbish as her grandmama," had promptly put them in the kitchen fire. Her action had relieved the Curate at the time. Miss Topham had a will; the Curate had not; but he liked to feel himself buoyed up, propped — like cottagers prop a droopinguchsia in their window — by the vigorous personality of his betrothed. So long then as he was with Miss

Mary, it had seemed to the Curate that her action fully solved his perplexity; that, after all, the paper was no concern of his, that the whole matter indeed had long ago passed beyond the limit of his concern; but back again in his rooms, pricked incessantly by Mallaby's prying curiosity, such doubts beset the Curate concerning the integrity of his father-in-law and the fitness of his own intended marriage as to result in this sermon upon the killing of souls, which — because to many to talk of the soul seems not one whit less shocking than to talk of the devil — had seemed to some far-fetched not to say improper though others like Mrs. Topham and James Oliver had carried its lesson home and pondered much upon it. Mrs. Thompson sided with Becky and shook her head.

"To be sure," she said, "I don't hold wi' such-like talk even in a pulpit."

"I fancy," said Zip, "it's William Nannie's fretting about. He ain't been near to teetotal lately, I've noticed. Haven't you, Deb?"

"Aye, it's a job to get rid of him sometimes," owned Deborah frankly.

"If that's all it is," said Mrs. Thompson, "to be sure, 'tis silly of our Nannie to make such a fuss about it. She's Mrs. William Topham and that's all as I can see that she need care about."

"If I was in her shoes," said Becky, "my! but wouldn't I let folk know it."

"That's just it," said her mother approvingly; "Nannie ain't got no proper pride. She ain't no more airs as you might say now than she had afore she was married —"

"Not half as many," said Becky.

"To be sure," replied her parent, "she don't seem to rise to her position as I thought she would have done.

Now if she were nobbut like a young man, as was one o' the grooms where I was kitchen-maid, she'd do. He were sweet on one of the young ladies an' she on him. He used to lodge wi' a woman in the village. 'Mrs. Brown,' he says to her, 'you scerve me my victuals as you would to a gentleman,' he says, 'an' don't,' he says, 'be a-bringing in of the cheese along wi' the other dishes but last,' he says, 'as the gentlefolk have it.' "

"Did he marry her?" said Becky with interest.

"To be sure he did, an' a bad day's work by all accounts it was for them both. Her parents disinherited her and she hadn't a penny piece save a little that her grandmother had left her. And what's more, poor young man, he didn't get his cheese as he wanted after all. For she didn't care a bit how things were served so long as they was all on the table together since she couldn't abide, she said, the sight of the girl they had as general she was that untidy. The gentry," concluded Mrs. Thompson, as if delivering a judgment and withal regretfully, "is that contrary."

"It strikes me," said Deborah, "marriage ain't what it seems for all it appears so tempting."

"It's never tempted you, sis," giggled Becky.

"I've noticed," said Zip with deliberation, "that our Nannie have never seemed the same since the cousin as he was engaged to come to stay at Burnthorpe. Maybe she's jealous of Lady Winterfield."

"She ain't never said nothing to make you think so—has she?" asked Mrs. Thompson.

Zip shook her head.

"Then it's no more than one of your own fond notions," said her mother with some heat, "and don't go letting your father hear you talk that way. There's been enough gossip as it is."

That the boredom of which Marion had complained to Annie, as they had walked that afternoon to the Howe, was no legitimate excuse for what followed, I grant: but that the relations between herself and William were such as the gossips described — and as soon as the fortnight of Marion's visit had ended, they had collected about its happenings like flies at a midden, — I entirely deny.

Secret meetings were reported that could never have taken place: embraces described by those who could not possibly have seen them: and mud — far off its aim, but plentifully — was flung at her character and William's.

William had met Marion altogether three times during the remainder of her visit. Once at the local Agricultural Show, where he had seen her the smiling complacent centre of a bevy of fine folk and was passing hurriedly, when she had quitted them quickly (Marion had grown wiser since that day we saw her on Scarborough sands hurrying away with her little brood of hobbledohoy brothers and sisters from the vicinity of Mrs. Ryder and her friends) and gone towards him with outstretched hand and a note of protest in her: "Cousin William, how do you do?" and again as she was waiting in the gig for her father outside a cottage door.

William had stood and talked to her on this occasion, his arm upon the splashboard, her face bending to his, for fully half an hour so the gossips had said: though in reality their conversation had been brief indeed. But it was then that William had pleaded to see her again and alone; and Marion had consented to a secret meeting.

It indeed she might have forgotten had there been some other distraction that promised more amusement:



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as it was they had met and indulged together in old remembrances that had been best forgotten by them both.

But Lady Winterfield was no fool as the world counts such. She had won her position too hardly to forfeit it lightly to the indulgence of what was now a mere sentiment made piquant by the associations of their old relationship. In the great world in which she played her part with so much distinction there were men, who were almost as much her slaves as William was and had been: but she never failed to keep their admiration within the bounds of decorum just as over William — more primitive and therefore more difficult of restraint though he was — she wielded a certain cool authority.

Marion was one of those women who delight in provocation as a skilful angler in the successful casting of a fly: and where an honest passion would have overleapt the barriers that custom and convention have imposed upon it, Marion understood just when to draw back and interpose the chilly reserves of a disconcerting prudery.

So it came about that when Marion left Burnthorpe, it was with an easy conscience and in absolute ignorance of the mischief she had wrought.

William's nature — as Marion had discovered to her greater zest, — was largely primal: and the old passion, which had never died for her, she had recklessly fanned into a flame. It possessed William now — possessed him like an obsession: there was none of the chivalry in it that had characterised his youthful love-making: nothing of that deeper respect, which had underlain his first attraction to Nannie: it was malevolent in its influences, baneful in its result.

Decency, self-respect, affection for his wife, even the commonest regard for her and for her condition, — these things were swept away as by the swirling current

of a river in full flood. Even in his avocations about the farm, in the instincts of his animals, he found some lustful image of his passion and batted shamelessly upon desire.

He grew surly and morose: took little notice of his wife: was sometimes harsh to her: drank more and more heavily.

Night after night, Miss Deborah, presiding over the bar of the "Black Horse" would refuse with sisterly-in-law solicitude to fill him another glass. William swore he did not care. He had had enough to inflame appetite, to whet sensation. Marion was his only thought, — to have, to possess her the thing he lived for.

Indeed, I think that Ellen Thorpe was not far wrong, when in describing that time to Mary Ann, she maintained that William Topham for a season at least was mad.

And Nannie? She said little as you have heard: she hoped as long as she dared hope: and she prayed — with pathetic faith — always. Ellen Thorpe told Mary Ann that on the nights when William Topham was at the "Black Horse" and the hour told them he would not come home sober, Nannie, after the lads had gone aloft to their beds, used to come into the kitchen and wait there with her feverish eyes upon the clock, and her ears strained for the stumbling footsteps, that warned her she must be off to bed. It was Ellen Thorpe, who, on these occasions, thought it best to minister to the master's needs.

His wife never complained, never by one word or act risked the respect she exacted from all about her for her husband. And when the talk about him and Marion was at its height; and the busybodies came even to her with their mischievous tales, she heard them with a quiet smiling show of unbelief that betrayed nothing.

To her own people,— especially to her father, who, hearing some of the scandal, had sworn lustily that “if old Topham’s son slighted his girl, he’d mar every bone in his body for him,”— she made a brave show, laughing to scorn the tale-bearers with no bad imitation of Miss Becky’s boisterous humour. But the laughter came from an aching heart: for not the least of the torments that wrung the poor child at that time was the dread that her father — if he discovered William’s neglect of her — should insist upon her returning home. And abandoned and deserted as she was, to be in William’s presence — even unnoticed — was comfort for Nannie: to wait upon him: to feel him beside her in the restless watches of the night: to hide her face sometimes in the coat he had worn and flung off and kiss it furtively — these were the trivialities in which she found some elements of her former happiness.

There was nothing of the new woman about Nannie: but much of that which has in times past and will, I think, to the end of time, make for most men that which is best in women — a something almost divine.

Late in August some business called William to London: and he told his wife quite frankly he would prolong his stay and go down to Norfolk to see his cousin.

Marion was surprised to see him: she was also amused and a little — just a little bored.

She had taken one of her sisters back with her: and she was present with them both at their first brief interview and afterwards at luncheon. “Not Annie,” Marion had said, when Mrs. Oliver had pressed her second daughter’s claim, “Annie has her own groove here and is contented. I won’t disturb her. But I will do what I can for the others to make them as happy,” and Marion had smiled the little enigmatical

smile that always baffled Mrs. Oliver, "or as miserable as myself."

Sally was unfeignedly glad to see her cousin from Burnthorpe. He brought the latest news and in her heart of hearts the girl was just a trifle homesick. At luncheon she plied William with questions one after another until the whole little world of home had been exposed to her relentless curiosity, whilst Marion fed her dogs or made languid explanations to her husband, who was very deaf but did not like to miss the conversation.

They drank their coffee on the terrace: but Marion talked exclusively to her sister, after telling William that, if he only shouted loud enough, her husband would be delighted to hear all about his farm.

Presently she excused herself. She and Sally must go and dress. They were going to a garden-party. He was asked to stay that night. No? Could they give him a lift in the carriage as far as the station? He preferred to walk. Really, how energetic! Well, in that case — Good-bye. She gave him the tips of her fingers. "Her love to everyone at home" — and again — "Good-bye."

If Marion had intended the sorry comfort of some hidden meaning in those words "her love to everyone at home," they fell on ears deaf to the subtleties of innuendo. William had dropped her hand, had forgotten in his rage and fury to take his leave either of Sally or the old husband — "You must excuse him," Marion had said laughingly. "He always was a boor" — and vexed, humiliated, fuming, he had accepted his dismissal and made his way to the station.

CHAPTER XXX

THE BROKEN ENGAGEMENT

WILLIAM TOPHAM stayed in Leeds that night and reached Burnthorpe by the four o'clock train next day.

He was not generally given to keen observation but on this afternoon there was added to the morbid self-consciousness, that had been always the bane of his life, a tingling remembrance of his journey to Norfolk; and the dread that others might be already aware of why and where he had gone made him morosely sensitive and quick to notice that towards him at least, there was a change in the atmosphere of the little station. The solitary porter (he had been in the prime of life when William was a boy, though an old man now with grizzled hair and knees that knocked weakly together) had looked slyly at him as he lifted his bag: in the station-master's nod as he took his ticket, there was a tinge of disrespectful curiosity; in the 'bus two of his fellow-farmers, returning from the cattle auction at Markington, had had little to say for themselves.

Some irresistible impulse prompted him to go to Belmont. Even if his father were there and did fulfil his threat of turning him out, it seemed to William that a scene with him would be better than nothing for getting rid of some of the spleen, that had worked in him since his interview with Marion.

At Belmont, although Mary's wedding was now within a week of taking place, there reigned a silence even more marked than usual; the cheerful bustle one associates with weddings was conspicuously absent; and

Mary Ann's face, when she opened the door, was pale and concerned.

Mrs. Topham was alone in the breakfast-room.

"Why, William," she exclaimed, rising. "Then you've heard. It is good of you to come."

"Heard — heard what?" repeated William Topham, and he thought, as he looked down into her face, that his mother had aged, since the time he saw her last.

Mary Ann had waited to ask if she should bring in tea; and to her Mrs. Topham spoke.

"Have you told Miss Mary tea is ready?"

"Yes, mam, but she won't come down and she says she won't have anything took up."

"Has she eaten her dinner?"

"No, mam, her tray is just as you left it outside her door."

"Won't she let you in?"

"No, mam."

Mrs. Topham sighed; Mary Ann left the room.

"What's up with Mary?" said William.

"I thought you had heard," said Mrs. Topham.

"The marriage is broken off."

"What?" William shouted.

"It is broken off," repeated his mother drearily.

"Mr. Morton went away for a few days last week. Of course we thought nothing about that,—so near the wedding too. But yesterday morning he wrote to your father to say he could not possibly go through with it," in her agitation the poor lady repeated her words — "could not possibly go through with it."

"The damned scoundrel!" said William. "Why not?"

Mrs. Topham shook her head.

"I don't know. No-one knows. But it seems to me he has not really been the same for some time. Your

father has not been himself lately either — so worried. And I am afraid, though he does not tell me anything, he may have been speculating and had losses. If so and Mr. Morton has heard, that may have something to do with it."

"He won't have the pill without the gilding — won't he?" said William grimly. "Confound the animal! Only let me meet him —"

"I don't know what to think," said Mrs. Topham, passing her hand over her face. "In his letter he gives no reasons at all. And yet your father seems perfectly satisfied. Mary says it is all her father's fault. She has locked herself in her room. She refuses to let us in, to speak or to have any communication with us at all. My only comfort is," concluded Mrs. Topham unconsciously adding a touch of comedy to the disaster, "that though she refuses to take any of the food we send up to her, she must have been down in the night to the cellar, for there was quite a large slice gone out of the cold beef, and some creams that Mary Ann had been trying for the wedding breakfast had disappeared as well."

"I can't understand it," said William. "Is the fellow coming back again?"

"He is not coming back. He says of course that all the blame must be attributed to him. But you know Burnthorpe, William, the gossip will embitter Mary's whole life."

William swore angrily, pacing up and down the room.

"If you go upstairs," continued Mrs. Topham, "you will see all the presents, her dress and trousseau thrust into one room. I never saw such a sight. To-morrow Annie Oliver is coming to help me to get some of the things sent back. But it is terrible," the tears were

streaming down her cheeks, "and the worst of it is, William, she really loved him."

"The first person she has then," said William.

"Perhaps," said his mother gently. "But that does not make it any less hard for her, does it?"

"What does Henry say to all this?" said William presently.

Mrs. Topham's face was all distress again.

"Henry," she repeated, "I can't make Henry out. He hasn't been himself for some time and now this affair seems to have completely broken him down. I cannot help thinking, William, that at the back of it all there is some great trouble. That Henry knows of it though he will not speak, I am sure,—that your father knows—I am certain—and that this young man may have found it out seems probable. But what it is I cannot divine though I think and think and think."

There was a pause in which William drank thirstily the tea his mother had poured out for him; and Mrs. Topham dried the tears with which her eyes seemed swollen.

"I have never asked how Nannie is," she said presently, in her ordinary kindly way.

"I haven't seen her this last week," said William gruffly; "I've been to London, you know. I went from there to Thetford and had a look at Marion."

"Indeed," said Mrs. Topham stiffly. "And how did Marion receive you?"

William Topham laughed mirthlessly.

"As you would expect her to receive—a country cousin!"

"Nannie," said Mrs. Topham gently, "will have wearied without you. You must be sure to let me know how she is when you get back. And be very kind to her, William, my dear, be very kind."

William made no reply. Henry did not come in. "He was working overtime at the office," his mother explained,—and Mr. Topham was at Bishopton.

As Mrs. Topham walked with William down the laurel-bordered drive to the gates, whose fantastic griffin-fins looked in the red sunlight more menacing than ever, she reverted again to the unknown trouble that seemed almost to materialise itself in those monstrous forms.

"William," she said, looking back at the house, "I often think, and God forgive me if I do wrong, that your father has not made all his money fairly. Look at the Falls, look at your grandmother's Will,—such money can never bring a blessing. Is its curse upon us now?"

"It's been on some of us pretty well all along," said William, as he strode away.

Nannie was sitting in the dining-room window sewing, much as William had been wont to see her in the bar-parlour at the "Black Horse." But to-day her pretty face was drawn and tear-stained; and, as her husband entered, she thrust her work hastily out of sight beneath her apron, whilst with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes she waited for him to speak.

Ellen Thorpe, who had met William in the passage, had told him with covert reproach, that the mistress was not so well that evening; and, indeed, all day Nannie's head had ached and throbbed in dull but annoying fashion.

Then Becky had been over to tea and in discussing William's absence had let her tongue run somewhat freely. "William would not leave her, as he had left Nannie,—not even writing, indeed!" Miss Becky would let him hear about it if he were her husband. "And going to see Lady Winterfield—as if there hadn't been enough talk already about them? Yes,

there had and Nannie knew it as well as she did, so what was the use of pretending she didn't? Anyway if she were Mrs. William Topham, she wouldn't sit so still under it — not she. It was all very well to be dumb but in her opinion there was also a time to speak; — and that time had come now."

She had gone at last, it being her turn that evening to entertain the young man, who was courting her, in the parlour.

And Nannie with a head that ached none the less for Becky's chatter, had taken up her sewing and tried to think of happier things — of nestling baby limbs and fireside lullabies — as she stitched a miniature frilling into a diminutive shirt.

William's temper was no better for the news about his sister. All the way from Belmont to the Howe his wrath had fed itself upon it; it was at white heat now, needing only the flimsiest contrariety to spend itself on the first innocent that crossed his path.

"Well," he said roughly to his wife, "you don't seem to have much to say to me."

"I am so surprised," said Nannie. "You have never *wrote*, you see, so I didn't expect you."

"Say 'written,'" William corrected her irritably.

"Written," said Nannie obediently. "Shall I get you some tea?"

"No, I don't want your damned tea," answered William rudely. "You sit there like a numbskull when I come in. I must say you give me a nice welcome home."

Nannie had taken her needle and was pricking it into the wood of the sill with little nervous jerks. William's anger; her own uneasiness; Becky's gossip seemed to make the air electric.

"I didn't ask you to go away," she said. "You went of your own free will and for your own purpose."

"And what was my purpose, pray?" said William coldly.

Nannie answered him indirectly, her blue eyes bright and feverish.

"I wonder that you came back at all, that you could tear yourself away from Lady Winterfield."

"What the devil—" began William.

"I hate her!" said Nannie incoherently. "I hate her. She has stolen you from me. Ever since she came here that day, you've thought of nothing but her. Even in your sleep you speak her name. There's gossip all over the place about you both. Not that I'd believe a word of it if you were not so different. You don't seem the William that I married. You might be another man."

There were tears in her voice, in her eyes; she looked at William pleadingly,—ready to take back every word she had said—if he would only take her in his arms. But William made no sign. His cold stare had something almost of hate in it; although it was not his wife he saw at that moment but Marion,—Marion with her languid indifference, giving him the tips of her fingers. Marion, half amused, half bored, not caring how openly she snubbed him; and the secret, insolent stare of her lackeys at his dusty country clothes.

"Good God," said William. "If I had known I should get such a reception as this, I might just as well have stayed away."

"You had better stay away then," said Nannie shrilly, stung into such rebellion as her gentle spirit had never known in her life before. "I am sure I don't want a man that's hankering after another woman all the time."

William took up his hat. "Good God! if that's all you have to say to me, when I come home to you, by

heaven, but I'll leave it. I know it is true what you've said. That I haven't done my duty by you. That these last weeks I've been more mad than sane. But I won't trouble you any more. I'll go."

He flung the door open and strode into the passage.

Nannie, her brief anger already spent, called after him but the slamming door drowned her voice. She ran to the window and tapped her thimbled finger frantically against the pane, but William went down the path without looking back.

At the white gates of the avenue, he almost ran into the arms of Mr. George Fall.

"Why, William," said Mr. Fall, "you're the very person I was looking for. I'm having a little 'do' of my own at the old pub and I wanted you to join us."

"I'll join you," William said.

Mr. George eyed him slyly.

"It's to celebrate a domestic event, William. Deb's said 'yes' at last."

"I don't care what it is," said William recklessly, "but I'll drink a glass to it, as many as you like."

Mr. George linked his arm in his. As he did so he looked back at the window of the porch room showing above the trees.

"It was harder than anyone would think," he said meditatively, "for my sister to be turned out of yon old place. She loved it like some would a child."

"Did she?" William said indifferently.

"Aye, she did," said George Fall, "an' so did I."

CHAPTER XXXI

THE BLACK POND

WHEN Ellen Thorpe, hearing William's raised voice and then the banging of the door, had gone into the parlour to see what the matter was, she found Nannie on her knees beside the sill, sobbing as if her heart would break.

"I have driven him away," she said in answer to Ellen's questions, as soon as she could speak. "I've driven him away. I don't know what come over me to speak as I did, but I have driven him away."

"Fiddlesticks!" said Ellen Thorpe. "It's like a Topham to speak hasty. You've got to learn the Topham ways. As I was turning down the beds, I see'd him go out of the gates along with George Fall. So you'd best have your supper, for if he's got along with that fellow, he's bound to be late."

Nannie did as she was bid. She dried her tears. She picked up the chair that William had overturned in his headlong rush to the door; she drew the curtains; she lit the lamp; and when Ellen Thorpe brought her her supper of bread and milk upon a tray, she swallowed a spoonful or two in obedience to the old woman's urging, who stood and coaxed her as if she had been a child.

When Ellen Thorpe had gone back to the kitchen, shaking her head over the basin still half full, Nannie had stolen quietly upstairs and placed a lighted candle in the porch-room window, just as Miss Fall had done often in the days when Mary Ann was a young girl at the Howe. Then she went back to the parlour and

took up the little shirt. But she could not work. Tears of self-reproach blinded her; her fingers trembled; she pricked herself incessantly; and at last she laid it aside upon her work table, where it was the first thing Mrs. Topham saw when a few hours later the urgency of desperate sickness broke down the lawyer's mandate and she was summoned to the Howe.

One of the farm lads, who had been into Burnthorpe, had brought back word with him the astounding news of Miss Topham's abortive wedding; and Ellen Thorpe came back to the parlour to discuss the intelligence with Nannie. Miss Mary was no favourite of hers, and Ellen could not hide entirely a secret satisfaction. "Depend upon it," she said to her mistress, "'twas her temper. Even a poor creature like a curate couldn't stand it. She's a darby, is Miss Mary."

Nannie listened in silence, her self-reproach accumulating with every detail. This, then, was what had so upset William. And she in her ignorance and blind folly had heaped reproach upon him when he was already smarting from these things she had not known.

It was comfort of a sort to be told — as Ellen told her dryly — that the lad in passing had heard his master's voice loud amongst those making merry in her father's inn.

"He'll be late to-night for certain," said Ellen. "You get away to bed and I'll sit up."

But Nannie refused to go to bed, and as soon as the lads had disappeared up the ladder, that led to their sleeping loft above the kitchen, she left the lonely sitting-room and joined Ellen Thorpe. The old woman was sitting by the fire, reading aloud to herself as was her custom from the Bible, that lay open upon her knee, the Psalms for that evening.

Nannie sat down opposite to her, sometimes watching

the hands of the clock as they made their slow, imperturbable round, sometimes listening to Ellen's mumbled reading, of which odd sentences reached her clearly every now and then.

"Out of the depths have I cried unto thee, O Lord — Lord hear my voice.

"My soul waiteth for the Lord — I say more than they that watch for the morning.

"Let Israel hope in the Lord. With Him is plenteous redemption.

"Lord, my heart is not haughty — surely, I have behaved and quieted myself — even as a weaned child.

"Let Israel hope in the Lord from henceforth and for ever."

Ellen closed the book, took off and folded together her horn-rimmed glasses, which she put between the pages, and looked at the clock.

"He'll be back verra soon now," she said encouragingly to Nannie,—"thy sister'll none let him bide over long. Trust her."

A silence fell upon the house, that was almost palpable. The fall of a cinder to the grate: a snore from one of the sleepers in the loft above their heads, the fussy tick of the time-piece upon the mantelshelf, the deeper tones of the wooden grandfather clock on the stairs — these were the only sounds and they seemed to throw into even greater relief the strained expectant quiet of the house.

Presently with a gurgle, the clock on the stairs struck twelve: and at the last stroke Nannie sprang to her feet.

"Something has happened," she said, pressing her hand to her heart. "I feel it here."

Ellen, who had been dozing, looked at her bewildered.

"It's twelve o'clock," said Nannie wildly, "and he hasn't come. Don't you hear? He hasn't come. He

said he wouldn't come back. Something has happened."

"Best rouse the lads and let them gang and laik him," said Ellen. "It's a darkish night. If no-one's seen him home he may have missed the road. Which way would he come, think you? By the pond?"

Nannie nodded. She could not speak, an indefinable dread had gripped her. Once long ago a farm lad in the Falls' employ, coming on a dark night from Burnthorpe, had wandered into the pond and been drowned. Drowned clearly through misadventure and not design, so a sagacious country jury had decided, because in the pocket of his cord breeches had been found a rosy-cheeked apple.

"I'll wake the lads," said Ellen, rising.

But Nannie held her arm. She was not the woman lightly to discover their master's shame before his servants.

"He may," the words came inarticulate — "have stumbled or fallen asleep. We will take the lanthorn and go ourselves."

Ellen hesitated. She did not lack courage, but even she was not wholly inclined to brave the ghostly rumours that prevailed about the Black Pond on a dark night such as this. But of little good was it to speak to Nannie of such fears. This timid creature, who had been wont to startle at an opening door, to tremble at the sigh of wind about the house, to cower if the stairs had chanced to creak on stilly nights, faced her now with the arrogance of a superb courage.

Ellen spoke of the child. Her words fell on empty ears.

The child hidden in the womb — though in many an hour of silent rapture she had dreamt upon it — was as nothing to Nannie compared to William, her husband, the man, whose head had laid in love's abandon-

ment upon her breast, between whose being and hers were knit a thousand subtle filaments of silent love and worship and devotion,—filaments so fine, so delicate and yet so strong that it had seemed to the forsaken wife that not neglect nor even death itself should really sever them.

And so they sallied out together—the old woman with her lanthorn which threw strange and flickering lights upon the path, Nannie ahead—eyes and ears strained to the utmost, her heart beating fast but resolute.

When at eleven o'clock that night William Topham had staggered out of his father-in-law's house and taken the field path home, George Fall—for whom the best bed was in a state of preparation, being himself in no state for a walk—called after him: "Thou'd best be careful of the pond," William had shouted hoarsely back that he knew his own business best. He had forgotten the scene with Nannie, forgotten even Marion at that moment, his head buzzed queerly and his legs appeared to move without control. Once or twice he stumbled, then his lanthorn went out, but he had reached the last field and could see—unsteadily enough—the light in the porch-room window and towards that light he steered,—towards that light and was deep in the pond almost before he knew he had left the path.

He was up nearly to the armpits, sober once more but utterly undone with cold and exhaustion: and he knew that it was only a question of minutes, that if help did not come soon, there was no hope. And in that moment of anguish and despair, all that might make his life worth living seemed to parade before him and mock his feeble struggles to escape. He thought of the child that was coming and for the first time realised what that child might have been to him: but it was about his mother and his wife,—the mother, whose

maternal tenderness had never failed him, and the gentle, quiet, loyal-hearted girl, who — before Marion had crossed their path and he cursed her name aloud, — had shed such a blessed influence upon his soured and thwarted life — it was about these two that his last clear thoughts rallied in a desolation of helpless penitence and despair.

Then suddenly with quickened hearing he caught the sound of the opening door, heard Ellen Thorpe's timid protests, and his wife's voice clear and firm, saw the light of the lanthorn filter through the garden hedge and then come towards him.

He gathered all his forces together then for one desperate shout, and though his voice threatened to fail him and seemed to rattle in his throat like the breath in the windpipe of a dying man, his call was heard, and Nannie answered him, her voice ringing clear as a bell across the field.

"William, William, I am coming."

When William called, Ellen Thorpe said her mistress started running like a hare. Unable to speak, half dying, only dreamily conscious, William heard her splash her way amongst the mud and felt her seize his outstretched hand. Then she pulled with all her might, pulled with a strength that was almost superhuman, pulled till the sweat poured like rain from her face, pulled till every thew and sinew in her body ached again, pulled with indomitable courage till she had him prone upon the trampled sedge.

When Ellen Thorpe returned with the farm lads she had run back to fetch, William lay upon the dry ground whilst Nannie knelt beside him, half fainting, her trembling hands fumbling in the folds of his muddy shirt, feeling with the last desperate courage of an ebbing strength for the beating of his heart.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BUILDERS

"He that buildeth his house with other men's money is like one that gathereth stones for his burial."

WHEN William Topham recovered consciousness he was lying in his own bed, piled high with blankets, hot water bottles at his sides and feet; Dr. Oliver was somewhere in the room and bending over him was Nannie's face white almost as the sheet tucked about his chin.

This he saw as in a dream, as in a dream felt his wife's kiss upon his swollen lips and heard his Uncle's kindly voice: "Come, come, Mrs. William, we must get you to bed or we shall have you ill next," and so dreaming slept again—the deep beneficent sleep of recovery. That next day two notes came to Mrs. Topham at Belmont. The first—a few ill-spelt lines from Ellen Thorpe—told her of what had befallen William and assured her, in case rumour should assail her ears, that he was doing well; the other was a note sent by James Oliver to his wife which Annie brought her aunt, as she and Mr. Topham and Henry sat at their midday dinner.

"Will be detained here all day," scribbled James Oliver. "Premature labour. Extremely critical. Let Eleanor know in case she would like to come."

"I may go, John love, may I not?" said Mrs. Topham, handing the scrap of paper to the lawyer; and Mr. Topham bowed his head in mute assent.

Mrs. Topham left the room to make her simple prep-

arations, and a quarter of an hour later the lawyer handed her into the pony chaise.

"You will let me know," he said — and there seemed a difficulty about his utterance,—"how they both are?"

He stood with his hat raised — an act of courtesy not usual to him — until the chaise was out of sight, then turned and made his way slowly towards his office in the Market Place with the faltering step of an old man.

When Mr. Topham had drunk those glasses of his best port to his daughter's betrothal with the Curate, we left him steadied in the thought that the fate which for a space had seemed to threaten his undoing, was once again well within his mastery. The Rev. Thomas Morton once united to his family by a matrimonial alliance, even if by some unseen means he should discover more about his aunt's unknown relations than Mr. Topham had chosen to divulge, the lawyer felt sufficiently sure of his man and Miss Topham's wifely authority, to feel certain that the secret would be safe. And then, like a bomb in the camp, dispelling security and with menace of unthinkable disaster in the future had come the letter from Canada, which Henry — to the making of his manhood as it proved later — had read that afternoon. This letter, which had so puzzled Henry by its reference to a fortune — fortune and the Wintersgills, forsooth, with Mary Ann in his mother's service, the writer himself gone penniless to Canada but for Mr. Topham's bounty, old Tom leaving only just enough to save him from being buried by the parish — until his troubled, roving glance had fallen on that one black deed box without a name and he had known all.

George Wintersgill had prospered in Canada. He was now the owner, as he had written boastfully to his sister, the owner of one of the grandest wheat tracts

in the province, not to mention the fine stone house, which had replaced the former wooden shanty, and which, in fond remembrance of the old country, he had called the Howe. The name by one of those strange malignancies of fate headed the letter which had trembled in the lawyer's hand that morning.

George then being comparatively a rich man and able to gratify within reason all his modest wishes, had yearned exceedingly to have sent out to him the old family Bible which many a fireside recollection had pictured in its place upon the polished dresser, where he had seen it so often as a child. At the time of his father's death he had written to his sister about it; and Mary Ann had promised to send it as soon as she could find a convenient opportunity. That had come a month ago when a younger brother of Jerry's wife's sister, determining to try his fortune in this new land of promise, had taken the Bible with him amongst his modest kit. Mary Ann herself had packed the Bible but had not noticed that between its leaves was hidden the fateful sheet of newspaper, which had once wrapped a bloater and which fluttered to George's feet the moment he removed the precious book from its many coverings.

George had read, and reading had pondered, and pondering had bethought himself of many things, that until then had been half forgotten in the strenuous progress of his life.

George had been the lad that his grandfather — on that memorable washing-day — had pushed so impatiently aside; and recalling this and with it the gossip about his mother and some of his father's half maudlin revelations, George was quick to put two and two together. He had written first (as Mary Ann had once essayed to do) to the London firm, whose address was

given in the advertisement; and by them had been referred to Mr. Topham, who had, they told George, taken the matter entirely out of their hands. But enough was said to set George's imagination afire and his mouth watering. The letter to Mr. Topham had plied that gentleman with one awkward question after another; and failing a satisfactory answer, George threatened to come to England himself "come the fall."

No wonder that Mr. Topham had been beside himself that day, when he had made Henry the outlet for his tangled fear and passion. No wonder as he drove up to the Hall with James Oliver that afternoon he had been sent for to make old Lady Metcalfe's Will, that he cowered beside him, huddled up as if warped with cold, though the day had been warm to oppressiveness.

James Oliver had glanced at him more than once.

"You're not looking up to the mark, John," he had said at last with the kindness that in him sooner or later always overcame resentment.

The lawyer had looked at him suspiciously from beneath his shaggy brows.

"What makes you say that?" he had said gruffly.

"Because you are not," James Oliver had replied good-naturedly. "You've got to take care of your heart, John, and take things easier."

"Rubbish!" Mr. Topham had retorted shortly. "I'm well enough — too well."

That had been nearly a month ago and to-day Mr. Topham was a broken man. Ever since that letter from Canada, followed so quickly by the disgrace of his daughter's frustrated marriage, there had not been in Burnthorpe an unhappier, more haunted being than the so much envied lawyer.

The poor — and there were many among them in Burnthorpe and the neighbourhood, who, having suf-

ferred through the lawyer's extortion or got themselves lassoed amid the shifty coilings of the law he threw so skilfully, were hostile to him though the clamour of prosperity had drowned their voices,—the poor, I say, complain that they see the wicked flourish like a green bay tree—but they are too undiscerning or too dazzled to detect the canker at the root, to note the black blight creeping slowly over the proud trunk or to divine the storms that rage and tear amid the boastful branches.

When Mrs. Topham had told William that she feared his father was speculating and losing, she was far from the truth,—so far that the lawyer felt that in comparison with the exposure with which George Wintersgill threatened him, financial loss would have been a flea-bite. So sure, too, was he of Eleanor's loyalty and devotion that he could almost picture the calm and cheerful courage with which she would have faced and helped him to face a reverse of fortune. But shame, disgrace, wrong-doing—these things he knew instinctively would bow that proud spirit of hers to the very ground and break her heart.

And he was glad his wife had gone away that day to the Howe, that for a few days at least he would not have to meet her candid eyes across the table, nor have his remorse and misery quickened by the unconscious anxiety of her affection.

No wonder that as Mrs. Oliver caught sight of her brother crossing the Square, she remarked to her children how greatly their uncle had aged and how harassed he had looked of late; and she added glibly, "that she didn't wonder, not for worlds would she have one of her girls jilted like their Cousin Mary had been."

And yet Miss Mary's matrimonial miscarriage was the least of Mr. Topham's troubles. Mr. Morton roused in him no chill of fear as did the menace of George

Wintersgill's letter: the Curate was too feeble, too impotent. He had denied himself "an alliance with Mammon," as he had stigmatised his union with poor Mary, for the salvation of his own soul, and the clerical soul, methinks, is apt to become somewhat dropsical with self-importance; but beyond that Mr. Topham's secret was safe with him.

And Mr. Topham cared so little for the Curate that, could he have got at him, he would have spent his rage and affronted pride upon his body and then not doubted that he could have blustered him afterwards into fulfilling his promises to Mary.

No, it was not Mr. Morton that had aged Mr. Topham, whitened his hair, lined his face, shaken the old pompous deliberation from his gait. It was George Wintersgill's threatened coming and all it might portend. Mr. Topham had learnt the date from a letter of George's to Mary Ann, that she had left in the kitchen window and which her master had not scrupled to take away with him and read, a letter that though in it George spoke vauntingly of fortunes, had left Mary Ann quite unsuspecting except to make her think that George seemed to have achieved more than had once been expected of him.

Though Mr. Topham destroyed it, the letter took to repeating itself in his brain in a way that was maddening. He heard it above the drone of his clerks; in the sonorous voice of the Magistrate at the Police Court; even behind the homely chatter of his wife; at night it attuned itself to the tick of his watch beneath his pillow; to the rap of the death-watch in the wooden pillar of the old-fashioned bedstead: nothing could deafen his ears nor blot it from his relentless thought.

Already in imagination, that was more acute perhaps in its anticipated pain than would have been even

the bitter reality, he fancied a change in the bearing of his neighbours, a suggested stand-offishness, a distant suspicion, a cold and condemnatory consideration. It seemed to the wretched man that even the Burnthorpe children, who had been so often the recipients of his boastful charity, had turned against him, and that there was a something curiously objectionable in their wide-eyed stare. Day after day, whilst his wife was at the Howe and when his business did not call him elsewhere, he would sit in his office,—the office marked "Private,"—sit for hours, his bodily eyes gazing vacantly in front of him, the eyes of his soul gazing inward upon the past.

He thought of his wife as she had been in the days of their courtship and early marriage. The knowledge that he had married a step or two above him had pleased him then; and yet so assertive had been his arrogance, so profound his self-esteem, that he had often in those days exercised a needless tyranny to let Eleanor see that he considered himself as good as she was. The recollection, as he bowed his head between his hands, wrung a groan from him.

He thought of William, too,—of William as a child, looking up into his face with a child's clear eyes. He remembered how proud he had been of the little fellow, how gratified when Lady Metcalfe had offered to be his sponsor, how with his birth his own spirit of worldly advancement, of self-aggrandisement had gone forward by leaps and bounds. And now between William and himself there was irrevocable estrangement, a tale of harshness and injustice, that could never be forgotten.

Now it was Mary, who stood at his knee, Mary, who had always been his favourite because even as a child in her shrewd, old-fashioned ways she had resembled him and had followed implicitly his gospel of what in

life were the things most to be valued. He could see her, the fair curls, the blue eyes like his own, the red mouth, thin-lipped even then, and the little, firm chin. She had been a great saver even as a child. He could remember giving her one Christmas a savings-box. Mary had spent no pennies that year, had eschewed the village sweet-shop, had never had a goody or a toy to share with other children; and at the end of the year she had brought him her box full and he had promptly displayed it as a sign of the child's prudence. He had been proud of her, so had his mother, who had given the child a sovereign to augment the contents of the box; only his wife had shaken her head, had dared to doubt that such a training could lead to good or that the well-filled box was very creditable. Then the fair hair and the blue eyes and the firm chin merged into the older, paler, sullen face as he had seen it lately, the face that ever since her broken marriage had scowled upon him unceasingly with suspicion, with contempt, with aversion.

The thought of Sarah, too, haunted him. Incidents of the old days, when he and she had been boy and girl together and which he had all but forgotten, were for ever springing to his mind. He could specially remember how once, when he had got into some boyish scrape and was in terrible fear lest old Mrs. Topham — ever the strictest of Spartan parents — should find him out, how Sarah had come to his rescue and one night, when things had looked their worst, had brought him the whole of her small savings. And to-day he and Sarah — in spite of that handsome wedding present to Marion, and suave meetings in public and at Belmont — were hopelessly estranged, and could never again, under any circumstances, meet together on the old childish plane of sturdy and happy comradeship. And justly

so. He had never been straight with Sarah — she had seemed to him weak and silly and he had thwarted and teased her; even his influence over their mother — and since Sarah's savings had saved his reputation he had always reigned secure in the maternal favour — he had used against her; and in the end he had — Sarah called it — robbed her. She had also warned him of a day that should come — and that day had come — when all his gain should not comfort him. For what, after all, had been the true achievement that had crowned his toil after these long years? His fine house, built like the house in the Scriptures on the sands and rocking already in its foundations? The honorable name that tomorrow men would spew at? The pride of prosperity that had reared itself upon a lie, upon misappropriation, and was to crumble into deepest shame? The delusion of self-righteousness that, but for that fatal paper that had fluttered from the Family Bible to George Wintersgill's feet, he might have hugged to the very end, seeing that though religion, morality and public opinion are fine things, yet they may — nay, they do — make as many hypocrites as saints.

These were the things he had accomplished, — despair, ignominy, the failure of all upon which he had set his heart and paid for so dearly. And it had been so easy. From the first day when temptation, in the form of Mary Ann's mother with her childlike confidence and her sensitive ignorance had crossed his path, there had never been a single hitch; though Mr. Topham could still recall as in a nightmare that last afternoon with his client when the fear lest at the tenth hour suspicion should dawn upon his dupe, had so parched his throat, that he himself had been forced to ask for a glass of water, which Mary Ann had brought him fresh and chilly from the pump.

When Mrs. Topham returned at the end of ten days, bringing with her the joyful news that Nannie was out of danger, her husband's altered looks caused her great concern.

The time for the Fairs was at hand; and the next day in the Belmont kitchen would begin the preparations for the old hospitality. "But as soon as the Fairs were over," said Mrs. Topham that evening, "John must go away with her for a change. They would take Mary with them,—yes, that was a good idea. They would take Mary with them and go abroad for a time until the scandal about the marriage had to a certain extent died down.

"Henry," and Mrs. Topham glanced at her boy with eyes of fond approval,—“Henry had shown himself so capable of late, that surely he and Mr. Barker (the head clerk) could manage things between them. Yes, they must go after the Fairs. It was no good saying he was well. Had not James Oliver only recently warned him about his heart? And had not he told her himself, too, that very morning, that he was looking ill and should have a change?”

The stricken man let her talk. He even gave assent and agreed that Italy,—yes, Florence—it had been a sentimental wish of his wife's from her very girlhood to see Florence,—would do well as the ultimate goal of their journey. “After the Fairs,” his wife said confidently, and before the Fairs were over, Mr. Topham told himself as he heard her, unless a miracle intervened to save him, all would be known, he himself stripped, exposed!

“Yes,” continued Mrs. Topham, trying innocently to dispel her husband's gloom, “to go by sea to Genoa would be pleasant. The voyage would rest him. And

you know you always enjoy the sea, John," said Mrs. Topham.

"Yes, Mr. Topham liked the sea." He glanced at Henry as he spoke, and in that long, miserable look that passed between them, each knew that the other knew the intolerable secret.

"Henry," said Mr. Topham abruptly, "has looked after me grandly whilst you have been away, Eleanor. He has been very kind to me —"

Henry got up hastily and left the room.

"Kinder to me than I deserve," finished Mr. Topham.

It was the next day that as Mr. Topham sat as usual in his office, staring with vacant apathy at the familiar things surrounding him — the picture of Belmont above his desk, the black deed boxes, the horse-hair sofa on which Mrs. Wintersgill had sat that day,—that the office-boy, a warty successor of the youth with chilblains, handed him a telegram. It was from George Wintersgill to say he had landed at Liverpool and would be at Belmont at eight o'clock that night.

Mr. Topham crushed the paper in his hand. A minute later the clerks in the outer office heard a groan and then a fall. It was Henry who, throwing down his pen, ran first to his father's aid; and some impulse — almost divine — sent the familiar term of childhood to his lips, that seemed to bridge at that moment years of misunderstanding: "Dad," he said, "Dad, what is the matter?"

Mr. Topham was huddled on the floor; his lips were blue, his face livid, he could scarcely speak.

"Send," he said with difficulty, "for your Uncle James and Eleanor."

Henry went for his mother. When he brought her — her bonnet put on awry, a shawl caught up in haste and

flung across her shoulders, her poor face controlled to such serenity of helpfulness as she could summon to her aid — Mr. Topham still lay where he had fallen.

"There is no use in disturbing him," James Oliver had said with deep regret in his honest voice. "I have expected this for weeks."

Mrs. Topham knelt down beside him and took his heavy head upon her knee.

The lawyer turned his eyes to hers and seemed to fix them there with curious intensity.

"Bad — bad — man, Eleanor," he said between his clenched teeth; and thus looking to the last upon his wife's face, so full of unutterable sympathy, of deep compassion, of subtle comprehending and complete forgiveness, John Topham died.

CHAPTER XXXIII

AND LAST

"And the people we have known, the men and women who have spoken to us with warm hands — Can we cast these things like dead leaves into the fire? Can we lie down full of heaviness because of them, and sleep and rise in the morning without them? Ah, Friend!"

THERE are those living now who still remember Mr. Topham's funeral on the First Fair Day. And they will tell you how for one full hour buying and selling was suspended, whilst to the muffled tolling of the bell, the lawyer's coffin was borne shoulder high between the pens of bleating sheep; and of the long procession of those who followed to pay their last respect to the dead man which seemed, as it wound its slow way across the silenced alleys of the Fairs as if it would never end. Even the Irish drovers lolling against the stack-bars with the sheep-dogs at their feet and curiously gazing at this spectacle of Death and Nothingness, that for a brief space had hushed the hubbub of the Fairs and filled the town with signs of mourning, raised their ragged caps or made the sign of their faith as Mr. Topham's coffin passed them, realising, perhaps, in their dim, imaginative way, that in this poor shell were concentrated all the passions, the failures, the suffering that go to the making of a life, just as the sun condenses into a single dew-drop — like a tear — the mists that have permeated space.

Indeed, as far as Mr. Topham's funeral went, everything that could be done to ensure him honourable burial was done in the men's minds; so that Burnthorpe

was inclined to be indignant when, years later, his younger son caused to be set up in the church a memorial brass with only the lawyer's name, the dates of his birth and death and the words: "Mea Culpa."

Among the mourners was one man, easily distinguishable as a stranger, a man with a lean, brown face and a goat-like beard hanging from his chin, a man in grey clothes with wisps of crape about his hat and sleeve, that Mary Ann had bound there that morning. Henry saw him as he stood half supporting his mother by the side of his father's open grave, saw him and watched him to the end of the service with loathing suspicion and a sense of sickening terror. But Henry need not have feared.

George Wintersgill, come hot-foot from Canada, vaunting on the ship that he was going home to "make things hum," breathing the vengeance of shameful disclosure against the man who had robbed his mother and her family,—found himself strangely baffled and discomfited, when he found his man dead, and revenge, judgment, punishment alike taken out of his hands.

Baffled and discomfited but also not unrelieved, for there ran in George (though in appearance he was an apotheosis of his father in Sunday clothes), a vein of his mother's kindness, of her broader outlook upon life, her generous temper and high-minded tolerance; and also, do what he would, George could not forget that Mr. Topham had played the benefactor to his family.

In nearly every letter from his mother,—letters written at her dictation either by Mary Ann on her Sundays home or Jerry's wife, who was rather proficient at penmanship,—there had always been some word of gratitude to Mr. Topham, mention of his kindness to old Tom, of Mary Ann's good place, of the benevolence

that, mockery as it was. Mrs. Wintersgill had believed in to the last.

And so George, finding Mr. Topham beyond his reach, confronted with his sister's fierce loyalty to the family she had served so long, seeing Henry — little more than a lad — George could remember him as a child in petticoats — stern and unshaken in his resolve to right as far as it lay in his power the wrong that had been done — George proved singularly amenable. Of what was arranged between them Burnthorpe knew nothing nor indeed anything — beyond a hint of financial failure — of the true facts of the case.

Mr. Topham's business was taken over by his head clerk, Belmont put up for sale, and Mrs. Topham, her daughter and Mary Ann left Belmont and moved into the little house in the Terrace, that had once been distinguished as the Misses Lightfoot's Academy.

The Misses Lightfoot had had a legacy left them by an old admirer of their father's and on the strength of it had removed a year ago to the wider and livelier sphere of Markington.

Henry Topham stayed with his brother until the spring, when he went out to Canada, where no less a person than George Wintersgill had offered him work if he would take it. Before he went his engagement with Annie Oliver was publicly announced; and twelve months later she went out to him.

As to Belmont it was to be sold and yet did not sell; until folk came to forget that its name had been "Belmont" and called it only "Topham's Folly."

To-day it still stands empty in the midst of its neglected garden. The birds build as they will now in the untrimmed shrubberies and amongst the ivy, that almost covers many of the windows. The shutters downstairs hang rotting on their rusty hinges; someone in wanton

mischievous mischief has broken the wings of one of the great dragons that guard its gates, and the wretched beasts with their curled tails and fierce heads are a sport for all the mischievous lads of the town. These are the things that Burnthorpe knew; but there are other things that Burnthorpe never knew.

They never knew, for instance, that the house in the Terrace was not Mrs. Topham's at all, but Mary Ann's. How could they know, seeing that in the house of which she was really mistress, Mary Ann still chose to live as servant? Even Mrs. Topham did not grasp the truth; for the double shock of her husband's death and supposed ruin (that other story of his wrong-doing she never actually knew), had told upon her and the once capable mind was even then fast losing its hold upon realities. Mrs. Topham lived in a Present, that never knew any sudden severance from what her life had always been, except the one desolate fact of her widowhood.

In the little house in the Terrace were the old familiar things that had always surrounded her, from the feather bed, that had been a part of her dowry, to Mr. Topham's watch that hung to the tester.

In fact, the house in the Terrace was but a material replica of Belmont with a spiritual difference; and this difference, even to poor Mrs. Topham's clouded senses, became in time perceptible.

There was more ease, more comfort, none of the indictments, that at one time had made life so burthen-some; and about this new Belmont as time went on, children often played, children that could be naughty sometimes and on such occasions were placed by Mary Ann with their rosy faces to the wall until the phase had passed: children whose joyous play was never checked as Henry's used to be in the old days, when

his mother told him fairy-tales in whispers; and who came as often as Nannie could be prevailed upon to spare them from the Howe.

Mrs. Topham was greatly blessed in the domestic felicity of her sons; and in the happiness of their married lives, she seemed herself to live again in calm and radiant thankfulness.

There are marriages that are never blessed with perfect happiness; but for those who find it, I say — and do not tell me that I dream,—it is the best life has to offer.

There is nothing to compare with it; nothing to excel it. It springs from the basest in us, it rises to the highest. It is consolation and support through all life's happenings. It is cherishment in health and sickness. It is endurance through good report and ill. Poverty does not diminish it, Time cannot strain it, Death cannot vanquish it. After long years,—years it may be that have held estrangement in them,—it has the power to clasp old hands as closely as on the day when youth's rosy fingers first trembled in the young lover's palm.

The happiness of Mrs. Topham's sons varied greatly in degree. Henry and Annie had been companions from childhood. Neither had ever swerved from one another; they had drunk at the same sources of remembrance; they had faced the first serious trouble of their lives together,—as they faced others, including many years of hard work almost of privation in a country that was never home to either though their children settled there. After their marriage they were never separated. Theirs was a oneness of companionship, of thought and action, that is so rare a thing, men may truly regard it as a gift from the Immortals.

With William and his wife it was of necessity not

the same. William never fell again. That night of the Black Pond had marked a turning point in the road.

"What is the cost?" he had asked James Oliver on that day of peril and anxiety, when Nannie's first child was born; and James Oliver had answered him with characteristic bluntness, possibly with instinctive displeasure: "A still-born boy."

He worked hard, he made the farm pay, he was generally respected. But no one loved him as they seemed to have loved even the remembrance of Henry; and he remained to the end a morose and melancholy man.

Nannie, bright and sunny, used to play upon his austerity like a streak of light. She reminded one of the sun-glint that one sees reflected from the grey sides of some old flinty scaur.

How she loved him was common talk; how he loved her was only known afterwards, when on her — But why go further? Let us leave the Howe now, whilst prosperity is at full tide; whilst peace and happiness gather about its hearth; whilst little children make glad its once deserted chambers and the orchard rings with merry shouts; whilst Nannie is still there to steal upstairs and watch from the porch-room window for her husband's coming, as she had been used to do in the early days of their marriage.

So, cared for and tended by Mary Ann and so happed about by faithful love and service, that no rumour of the Burnthorpe gossip ever hurts her, Mrs. Topham leads a peaceful and sheltered life. She and Mary Ann, who is quite a daughter to her now that Miss Mary is married — for though it would be too long to tell you how, Miss Mary did after all marry the Curate, — sleep together in the big feather bed, face one another across the round table at their meals, and come in the end to

be as inseparable and dependent one upon the other as the most devoted of husbands and wives.

But in time a day comes when the door of the double-bedded room is locked and kept locked; and often, waking from her sleep in the next room, Mary Ann sits up and thinks her mistress is calling her and then remembers suddenly that she needs her help no longer.

It was in those days after her mistress's death that I and Mary Ann learnt to know one another.

William's girls come to stay with her sometimes but for the most part she lived alone in the Terrace house, "never lonely there" so she told me, "*never alone.*"

Many an afternoon have I sat with her over the bright fire and cheery hearth, waiting for the kettle to boil and listening to her stories of the old days,— stories that with so little skill I have essayed to weave into this motley history.

"Never alone," she tells me: and I know that as so many old and lonely folk come to do, she lives in the Past, a Past that is so much more real to her than the Present, that its very ghosts become substantialities and assume again the tints and glow of life.

And as she talks, they come to me, these shadows, and I know them all,— Mr. Topham, his wife, William, pretty ambitious Marion, Mrs. Oliver, old Mrs. Topham. Indeed some I may know if I will in the flesh,— Henry a prosperous man, Annie a buxom matron, Miss Topham the portly spouse of no less than an archdeacon, James Oliver a man full of years and honour; but these are not as interesting to me as those others that are and are not, that have lived and sinned and suffered and gone — whither?

For many years Mary Ann — "Topham's Mary" as

they called her in Burnthorpe — lived on in the little house in the Terrace, lived to a serene and quiet old age, seeing one generation pass and another go, until it seemed that of those who had lived and endured with her, she was to be the last.

The Death that comes to us all,— to you and to me — and, strange and bewildering thought, to the children that play around us, all unconscious of the meaning of their lives,— Death, which some men call the End, and others the True Awakening (and which be true I wot not nor greatly care) came at last to this good and faithful servant, came but as gently and as unawares as sleep steals upon the tired child hushed in its mother's arms.

THE END